



# THE KREMLIN'S INFLUENCE QUARTERLY

BULGARIA POLAND UKRAINE

LITHUANIA NORWAY

POLITICS

MEDIA

# #4

# THE KREMLIN'S INFLUENCE QUARTERLY #4



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## **Free Russia Foundation**

### **Editor-in-Chief**

Anton Shekhovtsov

### **Project Manager**

Grigory Frolov

### **Proofreading**

Courtney Dobson, Bluebearediting

### **Authors**

Anton Shekhovtsov

Alisa Volkova

Alexandra Yatsyk

Ihor Lossovskiy

Vitold Jančis

John Færseth

### **Layout**

Pavel Elizarov

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# SUMMARY

The third issue of *The Kremlin's Influence Quarterly* focuses on the Kremlin malign influence in the areas of European politics and media.

In her introductory essay, Alisa Volkova reviews the most recent espionage-related scandals between Russia and Bulgaria, and discusses the latter's responses to them. The author argues that the presence of Russian intelligence agents is undisputable and driven by history of close relations between Russian and Bulgarian secret services during the socialist era. When the overwhelming majority of EU countries expelled Russian diplomats in response to the Skripal poisoning in 2018, Bulgaria refused to show solidarity. However, when Bulgarian authorities had to fight off corruption scandals and saw public support waning, they started disclosing Russian espionage networks and acting upon them. Thus, as Volkova shows, Russian services are not always effective and eventually end up being used for Bulgarian local political games.

Alexandra Yatsyk examines pro-Russian political forces and groups in France ahead of the 2022 presidential elections. As the author writes, while the upcoming elections are a critical event in France deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, they are also crucial for Moscow, which has a very real chance to see a loyal candidate win the presidency. Although Russia did not figure very prominently in France's domestic discourse over 2020-2021, the far right's agenda, including criticism of Prime Minister Jean Castex's new security policy and the promotion of various conspiracies serves the Kremlin without even having to mention Russia itself. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, the Kremlin did hold an active awareness campaign in the context of its "vaccination policy" via French media channels loyal to Russia and by bribing new social influencers.

On the basis of his analysis of statements made by the Russian president, Russia's program documents and current foreign policy and military activities, Ihor Lossovsky argues that Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries reflects the "new doctrine of limited sovereignty," or the "Putin doctrine". According to the author, it is underpinned by five major domestic factors: the consolidation of the authoritarian regime; large-scale corruption at all levels; the use of energy and other natural resources to maintain domestic political and economic stability and as a "weapon" of international influence; a powerful and comprehensive propaganda machine; and the concept of legitimizing the use of Russian military force abroad "to protect Russian speakers."

In his contribution to this issue, Vitold Jančis argues that Moscow has attempted to dramatically influence Lithuania's information space to suit its own interests because of Lithuania's firm stance towards Russia's policies in the international arena. The Kremlin's main tools of influence in attempting to transform Lithuania's information environment include media registered in Russia, as well as a broad range of allegedly independent Russian outlets and experts, bloggers, and influencers who actively disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives on social media. The author warns that, in the near future, not only Lithuania but also the other two Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia, are likely to face a new wave of Putin-incited information warfare with Russia.

In the first part of his chapter, John Færseth analyses the political, economic and geopolitical context of potential malign Russian influence in Norway. As the author observes, Norway enjoys a low level of political polarization; it is a founding member of NATO and the majority of the population is supportive of its membership; Norway is not dependent on Russian energy; there are currently no pro-Russian parties represented in the Norwegian Parliament, and neither are there any signs of cooperation or any kind of Russian support for Norwegian parties. One of the few areas where the Norwegian audience can encounter pro-Kremlin narratives is particular elements of the so-called alternative media, and the second part of Færseth's chapter focuses on *Steigan*, *Resett*, *The Herland Report* and some other websites that have for several years been publishing content that can, to various degrees, qualify as pro-Kremlin or supportive of a pro-Kremlin discourse.



# SUDDEN REVELATION OF THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE IN BULGARIA

Alisa Volkova

A nighttime photograph of a cityscape, likely Sofia, Bulgaria. The central focus is the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, illuminated with warm lights. The city buildings are lit up, and the sky is dark. The word "POLITICS" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom of the image.

POLITICS



## ABOUT AUTHOR

### Alisa Volkova

Alisa Volkova is a political analyst at the Free Russia Foundation and freelance journalist.

## INTRODUCTION

The last two years have stood out when it comes to the number of espionage-related scandals between Russia and Bulgaria. In 2019, Bulgaria accused the head of the Bulgarian National Movement of Russophiles of espionage and having ties to the former Lieutenant-General of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, Leonid Reshetnikov, who was later banned from entering the country. In January 2020, three Russian intelligence service officers were accused of attempting to assassinate Bulgarian businessman Emilian Grebev by poisoning him with a substance similar to Novichok. In 2020, four Russian diplomats were accused of obtaining classified information about Bulgaria's energy sector, electoral process, and military affairs. Two more Russian diplomats were asked to leave the country in early 2021, when an espionage network was discovered. Nonetheless, this is not a major loss for the Russian intelligence services—according to the Bulgarian media<sup>1</sup>, there may be roughly 60 Russian spies in Bulgaria under diplomatic cover.

To outside observers, the Bulgarian authorities' active efforts to find and expel Russian spies looked rather surprising. After all, until recently, Bulgaria preferred to avoid any diplomatic scandals with Russia. Even when most EU countries had expelled Russian diplomats in response to the findings of the investigation of the Skripal poisoning in Salisbury United Kingdom, Bulgaria did not join the Western response, claiming that the investigation

had not led to enough evidence. This change of heart might be inspired by Bulgaria's domestic political instability. The ruling coalition led by GERB and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov are currently fighting off corruption scandals and public support is waning. It is in this context that Bulgarian authorities have turned to a reliable method to get support from the EU and attract EU funds to Bulgaria, which they can then present to voters as an achievement. One way to win the backing of the EU and Western countries in general is to distance themselves from Russia, and expelling Russian agents is a failproof way to do this.

## TRACES OF NOVICHOK

It is not uncommon for secret police in different countries to collaborate with each other, and there is a long history of collaborations between the Russian and Bulgarian secret services. Unlike in Russia, during Bulgaria's democratization during the 1990s, many top-secret socialist era documents were released to the public. Many of these documents revealed tight links between the secret services in Bulgaria and the USSR. One document is of particular interest—a long-term plan between the two foreign intelligence services signed in 1972, and its Annex 13, in which the Soviet KGB promised to provide support for preparing and implementing "acute measures," meaning assassinations<sup>2</sup>. It lists human resources

1 Sima Vladimirova, "Around 60 Russian spies hide under diplomatic cover here" [in Bulgarian], 168 Chasa, September 30, 2020, <https://www.168chasa.bg/article/9068571>.

2 "Registry of National Security and Intelligence Officers in Bulgarian Army," History (website) <http://agentibg.com/index.php/bg/2014-02-19-08-19-22/2014-02-20-15-06-22/2014-02-20-15-15-50>.



and special materials which could be provided, including explosives and powerful poisons. The recent attempted poisoning of Bulgarian businessman Emilian Gebrev in 2015 raises suspicions that such collaboration and support between the two countries' intelligence services is not over.

Emilian Gebrev owns the Dunarit arms factory. He was poisoned in 2015 in Sofia, along with his son Khristo, and his business partner, though luckily, all three managed to recover. Their symptoms were similar to those of the Skripal family and later on, Alexei Navalny in 2018 and 2020, respectively. This means that the poison may have been similar to Novichok. A Finnish laboratory found that Gebrev's samples contained traces of an unknown substance from the organophosphate family. Mysteriously, the samples then disappeared. At the time, the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office was not proactive in investigating the Gebrev case, and it was only after the Skripal poisoning in 2018 and the findings of investigative journalists that in January 2020, Bulgarian officials accused three<sup>3</sup> officers of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of Russia's Armed Forces (commonly known as the GRU), Maj. Gen. Denis Sergeev ("Sergey Fedotov"), Lt. Col. Sergey Lyutenko ("Sergey Pavlov"), and Col. Egor Gordienko ("Georgy Gorshkov") of the attempted assassination. According to the investigation, the two poisoning cases in the UK and Bulgaria are connected through the people who prepared and carried them out. Denis Sergeev was in the UK during the 2018 poisoning of Sergey and Yulia Skripal.

The Bellingcat international investigative journalism team discovered that eight officers from the Russian GRU, who were part of an elite sub-unit of Military Unit 29155, travelled to Bulgaria several times in late 2014 and early 2015 under false identities, in teams of two or three people<sup>4</sup>. Their last two trips coincided with Gebrev's poisoning, in April and May 2015. But despite the investigative journalists' new findings, on 26 August 2020, the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office suspended criminal proceedings against all three suspects. The reasons given for that decision were the impossibility of proceeding with fact-finding when the suspects were not present, and long

delays in obtaining international legal assistance from third countries. While this step does not imply that criminal proceedings have been thrown out, it does mean that the case will remain "frozen" for the foreseeable future.

The most important part of the investigation—to identify a motive for assassination—was not completed, either. The official version of the events claims that the assassination attempt was in response to Gebrev exporting arms from his Dunarit plant to Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression in the Donbas. However, one Bulgarian news website quoted Gebrev stating that this was flawed reasoning, as Dunarit's export volume was too low, and there are much bigger players on that market<sup>5</sup>. Gebrev continued that according to that logic, the entire families of his "colleagues from Poland and the Czech Republic would have to be killed"<sup>6</sup>. The volume of Dunarit's arms business in Ukraine was rather insignificant, although Gebrev declined to comment on the exact numbers of his export contracts with Kyiv.

Instead, Gebrev offered his own version of a possible motive, connected with the Dunarit plant itself and the desire of certain people in Bulgaria to acquire it for themselves. If we examine the history of Dunarit—an arms factory in the Bulgarian city of Ruse—this hypothesis does indeed appear plausible. Following the collapse of the Corporate Commercial Bank, which owned Dunarit through one of its linked companies, the arms factory became the subject of a dispute between former CCB business partner Vasil Tsvetanov and Delyan Peevski, a member of the Bulgarian Parliament from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, media mogul and a symbol of corruption in Bulgaria. Shortly afterward, in early 2015, Gebrev's company Emko wanted to step in and acquire shares by investing 60 million leva (EUR 31 million) in Dunarit, a huge amount of money for the company<sup>7</sup>. These plans came to a halt following the assassination attempts on Gebrev in April and May 2015.

After Gebrev had recovered, Emko once again attempted to acquire Dunarit, and was met with a massive campaign against both Gebrev and his company: media owned by Peevski broadcast negative PR, Emko was audited by the authorities several times, and the company

3 Boris Mitov, "Prosecution office accused three Russians in Gebrev's poisoning" [in Bulgarian], Free Europe, January 23, 2020, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30393185.html>.

4 Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Post-Mortem of a Triple Poisoning: New Details Emerge in GRU's Failed Murder Attempts in Bulgaria," Bellingcat, September 4, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/09/04/gebrev-survives-poisonings-post-mortem/>.

5 "And third investigation of the poisoning of Gebrev is terminated" [in Bulgarian], News.bg, September 1, 2020, <https://news.bg/crime/i-tretoto-razsledvane-za-otravyaneto-na-gebrev-e-prekrateno.html>.

6 "And third investigation of the poisoning of Gebrev is terminated."

7 Nikolai Stoyanov, "Brief history of a war over Dunarit" [in Bulgarian], *Capital*, January 25, 2019, [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ekonomika/bulgaria/2019/01/25/3380215\\_kratka\\_istoria\\_na\\_voinata\\_za\\_dunarit/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ekonomika/bulgaria/2019/01/25/3380215_kratka_istoria_na_voinata_za_dunarit/).

Viafot claimed ownership of Dunarit. In the Panama Papers, Bulgarian investigative journalists from *Bivol* discovered that the end owner of Viafot's offshore company was none other than Alexander Angelov, an advocate close to Delyan Peevski<sup>8</sup>. The dispute over the Dunarit plant has yet to be resolved.

Gebrev's version of the events, that is, that someone in Bulgaria asked the Russian GRU for poison and assistance with an assassination attempt, has a valid foundation and is worthy of further investigation. Bulgarian analyst Boyko Noev believes that there is an additional reason for Russian officers' involvement in the operation against Gebrev: Russia's intention to control arms exports from Bulgarian factories<sup>9</sup>. To achieve that, Dunarit has to be under the control of people like Peevski, who are close to the Bulgarian authorities.

## SPIES WITH DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITY

At the same time as it accused the three GRU officers of an assassination attempt in Bulgarian territory, in January 2020, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it had designated two employees of the Russian Embassy, Dmitry Yaroshenko and Aleksander Khvatov, as "undesirable persons" and expelled them from the country. Yaroshenko was suspected of obtaining classified information related to Bulgaria's electoral process during past three years. Khvatov was accused of collecting classified data on energy sector for the previous two years.

According to Bulgarian media, Alexander Khvatov went to Bulgaria's southern border, where the gas pipeline connection with Greece was to be built<sup>10</sup>. There, he met with different people and showed an "unhealthy interest" in the project. The pipeline connection with Greece aims to reduce Bulgaria's dependence on Russian gas. When secret police continued the investigation, they learned that Khvatov was also looking for other information related to energy sector. He had been operating in

Bulgaria since October 2018.

The other diplomat, Dmitry Yaroshenko, served as a foreign intelligence officer. Under the guise of a first secretary to the consular service, he created false identities for spies in order to integrate them into Bulgarian society. For this purpose, he traveled actively throughout Bulgaria, filming the areas where the spies would live under their false identities<sup>11</sup>.

On September 24, 2020, the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry declared two more Russian diplomats *persona non grata* and gave them 72 hours to leave the country. Bulgarian prosecutors accused them of obtaining classified information about Bulgarian military modernization plans since 2016, in particular regarding maintenance contracts for F-16 aircrafts and plans to acquire drones. The two diplomats were a deputy trade attaché in Sofia named Sergei Nikolashin and Vadim Bikov. Investigations showed that Nikolashin was an intelligence officer who had previously served in the Russian Army. He has also worked for the Russian state arms corporation Rostec, which is headed by Sergei Chemezov, an influential figure in Russia and one of Putin's "friends." Undoubtedly, Chemezov has some interests in Bulgaria—his relatives and friends own a large, closed apartment building on the Black Sea coast in St. Konstantin and Elena resort, the stronghold of one of Bulgaria's most powerful criminal organizations<sup>12</sup>.

According to the Jamestown Foundation, the espionage activities raised due to the Bulgarian government's intent to buy US F-16 fighter jets.<sup>13</sup>

## DISCLOSURE OF ESPIONAGE NETWORK AS AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN TOOL

On March 19, 2021, Bulgaria was rocked by yet another espionage scandal. Six people were found to be collecting classified military information and passing it to Russia through its embassy. The information consisted of documents about the NATO Coordination Center in

8 Editorial, "Panama Papers: Trusted lawyer of controversial MP owns key offshore, ghost of Bulgarian KGB", *Bivol*, January 16, 2019, <https://bivol.bg/en/panama-papers-controversial-mps-trusted-lawyer-owns-key-offshores-the-spectrum-of-bulgarian-kgb.html>.

9 Boyko Noev, "Why terminate investigation of Bulgarian 'Novichok'" [in Bulgarian], *Mediapool.bg*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.mediapool.bg/zashto-prekratyavat-razsledvaneto-za-balgarskiya-novichok-news311435.html>.

10 Lubov Pavlova, "Who are the Russian spies and are they linked to Gebrev's case?" [in Bulgarian], *Actualno.com*, January 26, 2020, [https://www.actualno.com/crime/koi-sa-ruskite-shpioni-u-nas-i-imat-li-vryzka-sys-sluchaja-gebrev-news\\_1427445.html](https://www.actualno.com/crime/koi-sa-ruskite-shpioni-u-nas-i-imat-li-vryzka-sys-sluchaja-gebrev-news_1427445.html).

11 Lubov Pavlova, "Who are the Russian spies and are they linked to Gebrev's case?" [in Bulgarian], *Actualno.com*, January 26, 2020, [https://www.actualno.com/crime/koi-sa-ruskite-shpioni-u-nas-i-imat-li-vryzka-sys-sluchaja-gebrev-news\\_1427445.html](https://www.actualno.com/crime/koi-sa-ruskite-shpioni-u-nas-i-imat-li-vryzka-sys-sluchaja-gebrev-news_1427445.html).

12 Atanas Chobanov, "Vacation Soviet style" [in Bulgarian], *BIRD*, October 8, 2020, <https://bird.bg/pochivka-po-savetska-tradicia/?lang=en>.

13 Margarita Assenova, "Russian Espionage Scandal in Bulgaria", *Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 52*, March 31, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-espionage-scandal-in-bulgaria/>.

Varna, decisions from meetings of various NATO committees and NATO's plans in different regions, its policy towards Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, on the projects for modernizing the Bulgarian Army, and about people residing in or visiting Bulgaria from partner countries, etc.<sup>14</sup>

The spy ring was led by former intelligence officer Ivan Iliev. Iliev completed military training in Bulgaria and abroad, as well as in Moscow at the GRU. His main task was to build an illegal network and recruit persons who in official positions with access to classified information. His wife, Galina Ilieva, a Russian citizen, acted as a courier between the spies and the Russian Embassy<sup>15</sup>. Spies were paid for roughly BGN 2,000-3,000 (EUR 1,023-1,533) for their work, according to the information provided. Bulgarian Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev announced that such the disclosure of an espionage network of this scale had been unprecedented in Bulgaria since 1944.

Three days after the arrest of the six alleged spies, the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry declared Russian diplomats Maxim Ribkin, the first secretary in the Russian Embassy, and Alexander Zinkin, the second secretary, as *personas non grata* and gave them 72 hours to leave the country due to their intelligence activities<sup>16</sup>. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO is monitoring Bulgaria's investigation of the alleged Russian spy network and supports Bulgarian efforts to counter Russian espionage. The Russian Embassy reacted with a statement accusing the West of destroying the friendship between Russia and Bulgaria.

The timing of these "great" revelations was no accident—it fell right in the middle of a parliamentary election campaign, though Bulgarian authorities had been monitoring the spy network for over six months. An espionage scandal with Russian roots could be beneficial for Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, the leader of the conservative party GERB, whose popularity plummeted prior to the elections both among Bulgarian voters and Brussels, due to local corruption scandals<sup>17</sup>. It appears that Borisov had

hoped that the disclosure of Russian spies would bolster his image as tough on Putin and increase support from EU leaders. According to Bulgarian human rights advocate Mikhail Ekimdgiev, the government also "wanted to be liked by the new US administration".<sup>18</sup>

This espionage spectacle might also help Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev, well-known for his ability to ignore corruption, restore his reputation among EU prosecutors. In early March 2021 the European Public Prosecutor's office refused seven out of ten Bulgarian candidates for EU prosecutor positions due to their lack of experience and inability to carry out professional investigations<sup>19</sup>. It was a clear sign to Geshev that the European Public Prosecutor's Office pays attention to what happens in Bulgaria. By revealing the Russian espionage network, he is hoping to prove how effective he is in fighting a common enemy—Russia, in order to gain credibility and support.

Time will tell whether this strategy works for Borisov and Geshev or not, but all the recent espionage scandals lead to the questions: exactly how many more Russian spies are working in Bulgaria, and how easy it is to replace them when they are expelled?

## A SPY CREATES A POLITICAL PARTY

On September 22, 2020, a leader of Bulgaria's pro-Russia movement, Nikolai Malinov announced his intention to create a political party. This in itself would not be particularly surprising if Malinov had not been accused was accused of money-laundering and spying for Russian organizations in September 2019.

At the press conference in which no questions were allowed, chief prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov told reporters that "the foreign organisations [Malinov] was serving were in the Russian Federation. Among them are the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies of the retired General Leonid

14 Veselin Stoinev, "Unprecedented action against a spy network in the middle of the campaign: who will benefit from it?" [in Bulgarian], *DW*, March 20, 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3qtvX>.

15 Reni Petrova, "Six military and intelligence officers have been detained for espionage" [in Bulgarian], *OFFNews*, March 19, 2021, <https://offnews.bg/temida/shestima-voenni-i-razuznavachi-sa-zadarzhani-za-shpionazh-video-i-aud-748138.html>.

16 "Bulgaria expelled two more Russian diplomats" [in Bulgarian], *Free Europe*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31163834.html>.

17 Velina Gospodinova, "Boyko Borisov is the biggest loser in the political crisis" [in Bulgarian], *Capital*, October 5, 2020, [https://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2020/10/05/4122797\\_boiko\\_borisov\\_e\\_nai-gubesht\\_ot\\_politicheskata\\_kriza/](https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2020/10/05/4122797_boiko_borisov_e_nai-gubesht_ot_politicheskata_kriza/).

18 "Strange coincidence": NCC for the affair with the Russian spies in Bulgaria" [in Bulgarian], *DW*, March 23, 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3r00Z>.

19 Georgi Gotev, "EU prosecutor rejected 7 out of 10 Bulgarian candidates", *Euroactiv*, March 4, 2021, [https://www.euroactiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/eu-prosecutor-rejected-7-out-of-10-bulgarian-candidates/](https://www.euroactiv.com/section/politics/short_news/eu-prosecutor-rejected-7-out-of-10-bulgarian-candidates/).

Reshetnikov and the Double-Headed Eagle Society”<sup>20</sup>. Reshetnikov was banned from entering Bulgaria for 10 years. The prosecutor’s office also announced that it was investigating Malinov’s links with Russian media mogul Konstantin Malofeev and the exiled ex-head of the now-defunct Bulgarian Corporate Commercial Bank, Tsvetan Vassilev.

Bulgarian prosecutors even revealed some evidence proving Malinov’s contract relations with Russia. The following documents were published on the official website of the Prosecutor’s office<sup>21</sup>:

- A copy of the memo report from Nikolai Malinov as a chair of the National Movement of Russophiles on Bulgaria’s need for a geopolitical shift, presumably written in 2015 is the most interesting document of those published. The report consists of the Russophile pledge suggesting that the majority of Bulgarians are pro-Russian, but that the leadership is controlled by the US and the EU; a brief report on the activities and goals of the Bulgarian Movement of Russophiles; and a list of support activities that Malinov would like to see from Russia.
- A copy of the service contract between Malinov’s company and the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, dated December 2013. Services included monthly written analytical materials about domestic and foreign policies in Bulgaria, other Balkan countries, and the European Union, which were to have been delivered from January 1 to November 30, 2014 for a total fee of RUB 2,2 million (EUR 43,137 based on 2014 exchange rates). It is not known which materials Malinov actually delivered to the Institute. It is possible that some of those materials were in regards to parliamentary elections in October 2014, which led to political instability and protests for over a year.
- A copy of the service agreement between Malinov’s company and the Russian government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, dated February 2015. According to the agreement Malinov published advertising materials in the form of four 8-page newspaper supplements, in 13,000 copies of the newspaper *Duma*, and on the *Duma* website, and received RUB

900,000 (EUR 13,235 based on 2015 exchange rates) for this service. Materials included articles from *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, other Russian media, and original articles. The cooperation with *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* extended beyond than this particular contract. In June 2015, Malinov’s wife Daniela announced the launch of the Bulgarian edition of *Russia Beyond the Headlines* ([bg.rbth.com](http://bg.rbth.com)) licensed by *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, which is owner of the brand “Russia Beyond the Headlines”<sup>22</sup>. The content for the website consists primarily of the translations of Russian-language articles from *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and other Russian media.

- A copy of a donation contract dated January 2013 between the Bulgarian company Bromak, (Bromak has ties to Tsvetan Vasilev, the owner of the failed Cooperative Commercial Bank who fled to Serbia to evade prosecution), giving EUR 31,515 to the National Movement of Russophiles in exchange for producing 200 “Samara cross” badges commemorating 135 years since the liberation of Bulgaria. Malinov claimed that he put Vasilev in touch with Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev.
- A copy of the computer forensic examination of a mobile phone taken from the Movement of Russophiles, dated September 2019, with excerpts from Facebook and WhatsApp chats regarding the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies and the publication of pro-Russian articles.

Malinov’s memo report published by the Bulgarian Prosecutor’s Office confirmed previous investigations by journalists of Russian involvement in some scandalous business deals in Bulgaria. Malinov identified three steps to be done with Russian help in order to ensure financial resources for a new pro-Russian political party, which he aimed to establish. In the first step, Malinov suggested that telecommunication giant Vivacom should be transferred from Tsvetan Vasilev to Konstantin Malofeev with the help of the Russian VTB bank. He wrote that a preliminary agreement was reached between Vasilev and Malofeev. Indeed, a company connected to Malofeev did attempt to take over Vivacom, though it failed<sup>23</sup>. Instead, Vivacom was sold to Bulgarian businessman Spas

20 Martin Dimitrov, “Bulgaria Charges Pro-Russian Movement Leader with Spying”, *BalkanInsight*, September 10, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/10/bulgaria-charges-pro-russian-movement-leader-with-spying/>.

21 News message from the Prosecutor’s Office of Republic of Bulgaria, September 20, 2019, <https://prb.bg/sp/bg/news/publikacii-i-intervyuta/37009-syob-sht-enie-26>.

22 Vesislava Antonova, “Russian Journal” in Bulgarian” [in Bulgarian], *Capital*, June 13, 2015, [https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media\\_i\\_reklama/2015/06/13/2552118\\_ruski\\_dnevnik\\_na\\_bulgarski/](https://www.capital.bg/biznes/media_i_reklama/2015/06/13/2552118_ruski_dnevnik_na_bulgarski/).

23 Alisa Volkova, “Russian money supports corrupt Bulgarian politicians”, *The Kremlin’s Influence Quarterly*, #1, 2020, [https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/05/Malign-Influence\\_final.pdf](https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/05/Malign-Influence_final.pdf).

Rusev and companies with ties to VTB managers. It turned out that Russia was involved in the controversial deal, as Malinov had hoped, but it did not benefit him personally, nor the Movement of Russophiles.

The second step Malinov suggested was to take over Dunarit and the company Avionams, which specializes in plane and helicopter repair. Things did not go as Malinov had wished. Avionams was re-purchased by the Bulgarian government in 2016.

For the final step, Malinov described the importance of controlling a television station and that his attempt to acquire TV 7 in Bulgaria had failed. TV 7 was also one of the assets owned by Vailev's failed CCB bank. In 2016, the CCB was declared bankrupt and shuttered.

The documents published demonstrate a clear connection between Malinov and representatives of the Russian Presidential Administration, but it is also clear that Malinov overestimated Russia's ability and desire to support his pro-Russian activities in Bulgaria.

Despite the serious accusations, in October 2019, Malinov was "released" by the judge Andon Mitalov, who, in February 2020, was banned from entering the US due to corruption. Malinov was allowed to travel to Russia for five days without consulting the Prosecutor's Office. He travelled to Moscow to receive an award the Order of Friendship from Vladimir Putin for his contributions to strengthening the unity of the Russian nation.

Currently, Malinov is still under investigation, but no new developments have been announced. In 2020, he announced his intention to create a new pro-Russian political party, which he then managed to do. In April 2021, it took part in the parliamentary elections and gained less than 0.5% of the votes.

Many Bulgarian analysts consider accusation against Malinov as a performance for the benefit of Bulgaria's Western partners. For example, political scientist and program director of the Center for Liberal Strategies Daniel Smilov considers<sup>24</sup> that Bulgarian authorities chose well-known and marginalized pro-Russian figures for the espionage scandal with no real grounds for accusations. He believes that the scandal was created to show Western leaders that Bulgaria is not pro-Russian.

According to Smilov, it is also important to note that at the time of the accusations against Malinov, Bulgaria was embroiled in a political scandal and massive protests over Ivan Geshev's candidacy for the next Chief Pro-

secutor, due to Geshev's connections to oligarchy and involvement in corruption. For Sotir Tsatsarov, then chief prosecutor, who nominated Geshev, it was important to show to the Western leaders that he and his successor were fighting against Russian influence and oligarchy. Starting investigation against Malinov and announcing Reshetnikov persona non grata was an easy way to do it.

## CONCLUSIONS

The presence of the Russian intelligence agents in Bulgaria is not surprising and part of Bulgaria's socialist legacy, although it is still difficult to assess the exact number of agents, their networks, and influence. The last two years have shown that Bulgaria's national security gathers information about Russian agents and can leverage this information when needed. But the main question here is whether Bulgarian authorities intend to actually remove Russian agents from Bulgarian territory, or simply use scandals for their own political ends.

According to Boyko Noev, Russia has three main interests in Bulgaria: building a second Belene nuclear power plant in Bulgaria, constructing the Turkish Stream gas pipeline through Bulgarian territory, and control over Bulgarian arms exports<sup>25</sup>. Spy scandals have been linked to at least two of these issues. But whether it would really lead to the cancellation of these projects and the weakening of Russian influence is a big question—the revelations and accusations from 2019 and early 2020 have already been forgotten. The investigation of GRU participation in the attempted assassination has been terminated, and Nikolai Malinov, who accused of espionage, announced the creation of a new political party and takes part in elections. Overall, political and economic relations between Russia and Bulgaria had not cooled down.

To some extent, these scandals did lead to more Western support for the Bulgarian authorities. The USA, Canada, and the UK welcomed their decision to expel two diplomats in January 2020, and there was the NATO Secretary General responded positively after the spy network was revealed in 2021.

Current Prime Minister Boyko Borisov hoped to garner support from EU leaders by demonstrating that Bulgaria has little attachment to Russia. This was especially relevant in 2019 and 2020, when domestic corruption

24 Daniel Smilov, "Mess, joke, farce? Let's talk about a spy scandal." [in Bulgarian], DW, September 12, 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3PSv0>.

25 Boyko Noev, "Why are they terminating the investigation of the Bulgarian 'Novichok'?" [in Bulgarian], Mediapool, August 28, 2020, <https://www.mediapool.bg/zashto-prekratyavat-razsledvaneto-za-balgarskiya-novichok-news311435.html>.

scandals rocked Bulgaria's political system. In this, Borisov was successful—in August-September 2020, as Sofia and other major Bulgarian cities were beset by huge protests demanding government resignation, EU officials remained calm and supported Borisov's view to wait for the regular elections. Once that time had come, Borisov decided to repeat his once-successful strategy, though this time, things did not go quite as he might have hoped. His party GERB lost 6% compared to the previous elections and was no longer able to dictate who would be the next prime minister.

The presence of Russian intelligence agents is undisputable and driven by history of close relations between Russian and Bulgarian secret services during the socialist era. At the same time, due to modest economic interests in Bulgaria, Russian services are not always effective and can end up being used for local political games. What is worrying here is that Russian intelligence officers are ready to be hired to interfere in local political and business matters and are willing and able to use dangerous tactics brought from Russia, such as Novichok poison.



# THE PRO-RUSSIAN RIGHT AND THEIR ALLIES IN FRANCE AHEAD OF THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Alexandra Yatsyk



# POLITICS



## ABOUT AUTHOR Alexandra Yatsyk

Alexandra Yatsyk is Visiting Associate Professor at Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, Tartu University; former fellow of the Free Russia Foundation.

Putin's Russia has a long and well-documented history in France.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have often noted the Kremlin's use of both standard methods of promoting its interests abroad (through Russian embassies and consulates, branches of Rosstrudnichestvo, organizations of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Pushkin Institute, Coordination Unions of Compatriots, media outlets like Sputnik France and RT France, and the Russian Orthodox Church) and using another country's own institutions to achieve its ends.

Unlike in Germany, where the Kremlin's political infiltration is mainly targeted at the the far-right AfD's Russian-speaking electorate,<sup>2</sup> France's large Russian-speaking community is fragmented. The main lobbyists for Russian interests are French politicians loyal to the Kremlin along with representatives of the media, business,

and civil society.<sup>3</sup>

A study of French media over the past and current year does not reveal any new strategies of influence used by the Kremlin, which uses methods based on previously-established ties with France's right-wing radical community, represented by Marine Le Pen's National Rally and like-minded people who work in culture, education and the media, as well as on engaging influential and well-connected French citizens<sup>4</sup> (such as Francois Fillon, the prime minister under President Sarkozy, who joined the board of directors of the Russian Zarubezhneft in July 2021).<sup>5</sup>

The Kremlin's attempts to push its sympathizers into positions of power are hardly surprising: these are influential people who would make decisions that benefit Moscow, such as lifting sanctions and legitimizing Russian

1 Cécile Vaissié, *Les Réseaux du Kremlin en France*. Paris: Les Petits Matins, 2016; Nicolas Hénin, *La France russe: Enquête sur les réseaux de Poutine*. Paris: Fayard, 2015; Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

2 Nikita Jolkver, "Are Russian Germans the backbone of the populist AfD?", *Deutsche Welle*, April 14, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/are-russian-germans-the-backbone-of-the-populist-afd/a-48321687>.

3 "Chernyj internacional'. Kak Moskva kormit pravye partii po vsemu miru" ["Black International". How Moscow feeds right-wing parties around the world], *The Insider*, November 27, 2014, <https://theins.ru/politika/2113>; "Hotim kak v Parizhe. Dokumenty podverdili kontakty rossijskih vlastej s 'zhelytymi zhiletami' i nemeckimi nacionalistami" [We want it like in Paris. The documents confirmed the contacts of the Russian authorities with the "yellow vests" and German nationalists], *The Insider*, November 18, 2019, <https://theins.ru/politika/188244>; "Russia Tries to Influence Le Pen to Repeal Sanctions", *Bellingcat*, April 29, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/04/29/russia-tries-influence-le-pen-repeal-sanctions/>; "Timchenko's foundation managers", *Transborder Corruption Archive*, January 31, 2019 <https://tbcarchives.org/timchenkos-foundation-managers/>.

4 "Vstrecha s predstaviteljami delovyh krugov Francii" [Meeting with representatives of the French business community], *Kremlin.ru*, April 29, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65469>; "Uchastniki vstrechi s predstaviteljami delovyh krugov Francii (v rezhime videokonferencii)" [Participants of the meeting with representatives of the French business community (via videoconference)], *Kremlin.ru*, April 29, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5637>.

5 Benoît Vitkine, "François Fillon proposé au conseil d'administration d'un groupe pétrolier appartenant à l'Etat russe", *Le Monde*, Juin 12, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/06/12/francois-fillon-propose-au-directoire-d-un-groupe-petrolier-appartenant-a-l-etat-russe\\_6083811\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/06/12/francois-fillon-propose-au-directoire-d-un-groupe-petrolier-appartenant-a-l-etat-russe_6083811_3210.html); Vincent Laloy, "François Fillon, L'inconditionnel de Poutine", *Desk-Russie*, July 3, 2021, [https://desk-russie.eu/2021/07/03/francois-fillon-l-inconditionnel.html?utm\\_campaign=Desk%20Russie&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=Revue%20newsletter](https://desk-russie.eu/2021/07/03/francois-fillon-l-inconditionnel.html?utm_campaign=Desk%20Russie&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Revue%20newsletter).



foreign policy. Russia did not figure very prominently in France's domestic discourse over 2020-2021, and the far right's agenda, including criticism of Prime Minister Jean Castex's new security policy, anti-Islamic fearmongering, anti-Americanism, and the promotion of various conspiracies serves the Kremlin without even having to mention Russia itself. However, during the pandemic, the Kremlin did hold an active awareness campaign in the context of its "vaccination policy" via French media channels loyal to Russia and by bribing new social influencers.

## A "NATIONAL RALLY" OF MOSCOW LOYALISTS

It is no secret that in 2014, Marine Le Pen's party took out a loan of 9 million euros from the Russian First Czech-Russian Bank (FCRB), which was then resold twice in connection with the revocation of its license by the Russian Central Bank.<sup>6</sup> In 2016, two more attempts by the National Front to borrow money from Russian banks «Strategy» and «NKB»<sup>7</sup> (the party was renamed "National Rally" in 2018) were unsuccessful.<sup>8</sup>

The party's financial situation became even more complicated after a 2017 law came into effect, prohibiting French political parties from taking out loans from private non-European banks, to say nothing of state loan institutions.<sup>9</sup> The lawsuit filed on Christmas Eve 2019 by the Russian creditor, the Aviazapchast enterprise that «inherited» Le Pen's loan, caught the party by surprise. Le Pen's party is still dealing with the fallout, as the amount due is significant, even after signing a debt restructuring

agreement in June 2010 to extend the payment period until 2028.<sup>10</sup>

According to the French National Commission on Campaign Accounts and Political Finance (CNCCFP), as of 2019, the National Rally's total funds amounted to EUR 22,923,783.<sup>11</sup> As of January 2021, according to party treasurer Wallerand de Saint-Just, it still needed to come up with EUR 30 million for several upcoming election campaigns.<sup>12</sup>

On May 9 of this year, Marion Maréchal visited Moscow to celebrate Victory Day, an event that was largely ignored by foreign leaders (only Tajik President Emomali Rahmon paid a visit to Vladimir Putin)<sup>13</sup>. Maréchal's trip was, to many, reminiscent of the time her aunt, Marine Le Pen, traveled to Moscow at the height of her 2017 presidential campaign.. In an interview with French BMF TV channel in May, Le Pen herself once again delighted the Kremlin, noting the need to promote closer ties with Russia, lift sanctions against it and withdraw France from NATO.<sup>14</sup>

Recent polls predicting that Marine Le Pen will have a real shot at the coveted Presidency are likely fueling Moscow's hopes. According to a study by French Les Échos and Radio Classique, which surveyed 1002 residents over 18 around the country in March 2021, 48% of respondents believe that Le Pen is "quite likely" to win the 2022 presidential elections, and 36% are potentially willing to vote for her. Among those willing to vote for Le Pen, 60% (that is, 22% of all respondents) stated that they approve of her ideas, and 50% (that is, 18% of all respondents) see this as a way to express their political and social dissatisfaction. 58% of respondents stated that

6 Aleksej Tarhanov, "Marin Le Pen v dolgu pered chuzhim otechestvom" [Marine Le Pen owes a foreign country], Kommersant, February 5, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4243259>.

7 The intermediaries in this deal were Vilis Dambijš, director of the intermediary company, based in Latvia, and MEP Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, former consultant with Dassault Aviation. The latter also brokered a loan agreement between Le Pen and FCRB in 2014: see: Georgij Makarenko, "SMI opisali shemu poluchenija rossijskogo kredita partiej Le Pen" [The media described the scheme for obtaining a Russian loan by the Le Pen party], RBK, May 3 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/03/05/2017/59099d8a9a7947576768f2e9>; Sanita Jemberga, "Latvian financier said to act as a go-between to get Russian loan for Le Pen", Re:Baltica, May 2, 2017, <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2017/05/latvian-financier-said-to-act-as-a-go-between-to-get-russian-loan-for-le-pen/>.

8 Sanita Jemberga, "Latvian financier said to act as a go-between to get Russian loan for Le Pen", Re:Baltica, May 2, 2017, <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2017/05/latvian-financier-said-to-act-as-a-go-between-to-get-russian-loan-for-le-pen/>.

Aleksej Tarhanov, "Marin Le Pen v dolgu pered chuzhim otechestvom" [Marine Le Pen owes a foreign country], Kommersant, February 5, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4243259>.

9 Tarhanov, "Marin Le Pen."

10 Francois Lenoir, "Partija Marin Le Pen dolzhna pogasit' rossijskij kredit do 2028 goda" [Marine Le Pen party to repay Russian loan by 2028], RFI, June 6, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/россия/20200607-партия-марин-ле-пен-должна-погасить-кредит-российской-компании-до-2028-года>.

11 "Partis politiques: l'état des comptes pour 2019", Vie publique, April 21, 2021, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/279559-financement-des-partis-politiques-letat-des-comptes-pour-2019>.

12 "Le parti de Marine Le Pen en difficulté financière, licencié des salariés", La presse, October 19, 2020 <https://www.lapresse.ca/international/europe/2021-01-20/france/le-parti-de-marine-le-pen-en-difficulte-financiere-licencie-des-salaries.php>.

13 "Rahmon i Putin pribyli na parad Pobedy v Moskve" [Rahmon and Putin arrived at the Victory Parade in Moscow], Sputnik Tadjikistan, May 9, 2021, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210509/rahmon-putin-parad-pobeda-moscow-1039330864.html>.

14 "Marin Le Pen prizvala otmenit' sankcii protiv Rossii", TASS, May 25, 2021, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/11463745>.

they “sometimes agree” with her party’s ideas.<sup>15</sup> Among other things, 51% of the respondents believe that Le Pen can handle France’s current migrant problem better than Emmanuel Macron, and 44% share her views of national security issues.<sup>16</sup>

A typical National Rally voter is a middle-aged working-class man living in a small town and without higher education.<sup>17</sup> Such social groups are extremely susceptible to populist radical right-wing statements and become an easy target of information manipulation. However, over the past year, Le Pen’s electorate has gradually de-radicalized and become less “right-wing.”<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, the June 2021 regional French elections turned out to be a complete failure for the National Rally—none of the party’s candidates took the lead in any region. Only one Le Pen associate, Thierry Mariani, managed to reach the second round in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region.

Mariani has regularly and unequivocally demonstrated his loyalty to the Putin regime<sup>19</sup>—since 2012, he has been the French co-president of the Franco-Russian Dialogue non-governmental association, which aims to promote economic, cultural and political relations between Russia and France. The honorary president of that association is Putin confidant Vladimir Yakunin,

and the Russian co-president is LDPR member Sergei Katasonov.<sup>20</sup> In April 2016, Mariani proposed that the National Rally adopt a resolution to lift sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea.<sup>21</sup> In 2017–18, he was a member of the Kremlin propaganda media outlet RT “ethics committee”,<sup>22</sup> and has repeatedly spoken in support of Putin’s policy in Crimea and Donbas,<sup>23</sup> while also the Kremlin’s official version of the poisoning of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny.<sup>24</sup>

Participants in Franco-Russian Dialogue events include Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin, who fought alongside separatist forces in Donbas; the founder of the National Front / National Rally, Jean-Marie Le Pen; French experts, and other RT commentators, who promote narratives on sovereignty and cybersecurity, freedom of speech, vaccine policy in Russia, the Christian world, and other subjects that are in tune with Kremlin narratives.<sup>25</sup>

Mariani visited Crimea as an «observer» during the 2017 regional elections, the 2018 Russian presidential elections,<sup>26</sup> and during the 2020 «vote» on amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation.<sup>27</sup> As a result, in 2021, the Democracy Group of the European Parliament (DEG), which oversees election observation missions, placed him on the black list of observers.<sup>28</sup> The Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs, Leonid Slutsky, whose foundation supports,

15 “Les Français et Marine Le Pen”, ELABE, March 21, 2021, <https://elabe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/mlp.pdf>, p.6.

16 “Les Français et Marine Le Pen”, 2021, p. 17.

17 “Les Français et Marine Le Pen”, 2021, p. 17.

18 Clarisse Martin, “Présidentielle 2022: la cote de popularité de marine le Pen en forte hausse chez les électeurs de droite”, BFM.TV, June 4, 2021, [https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elections/presidentielle/presidentielle-2022-la-cote-de-popularite-de-marine-le-pen-en-forte-hausse-chez-les-electeurs-de-droite\\_AN-202106040172.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elections/presidentielle/presidentielle-2022-la-cote-de-popularite-de-marine-le-pen-en-forte-hausse-chez-les-electeurs-de-droite_AN-202106040172.html).

19 Benoît Vitkine, “Thierry Mariani, la voix de la Russie”, Le Monde, July 12, 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/m-gens-portrait/article/2016/07/18/thierry-mariani-la-voix-de-la-russie\\_4971309\\_4497229.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/m-gens-portrait/article/2016/07/18/thierry-mariani-la-voix-de-la-russie_4971309_4497229.html); Maxime Vaudano, Jérémie Baruch, Anne Michel, François Krug et Gilles, “Thierry Mariani: de la région PACA à la Russie, portrait d’un homme d’influences”, Le Monde, June 25, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/06/25/thierry-mariani-de-la-region-paca-a-la-russie-portrait-d-un-homme-d-influences\\_6085629\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/06/25/thierry-mariani-de-la-region-paca-a-la-russie-portrait-d-un-homme-d-influences_6085629_823448.html).

20 “Notre bureau”, Association Dialogue Franco-Russe, <https://dialoguefrancorusse.com/membres-du-bureau/>.

21 Sergej Smirnov, “Nacional’noe sobranie Francii odobriło rezoljuciju o snjatii sankcij s Rossii” [French National Assembly approved a resolution to lift sanctions against Russia], Vedomosti, April 28, 2016, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2016/04/28/639487-natsobranie-frantsii-odobriło>.

22 Sergej Smirnov, “Ključevoj proputiniskij politik Francii proigral vybory” [Key pro-Putin politician in France lost elections], April 28, 2016, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2021/06/28/7298680/>.

23 “Terri Mariani prizval mirovoe soobshhestvo priznat’ Krym chast’ju Rossii” [Thierry Mariani called on the world community to recognize Crimea as part of Russia], RT, August 1, 2016, <https://russian.rt.com/article/314855-terri-mariani-prizval-mirovoe-soobshchestvo-priznat-krym>.

24 “Deputat Evroparlamenta Mariani prokomentiroval situaciju s Naval’nym” [MEP Mariani commented on the situation with Navalny], RT, January 18, 2021, <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/823398-franciya-rossiya-deputat>.

25 <https://dialoguefrancorusse.com/evenements/>.

26 “Na vybory v Krym priedet delegacija nabljudatelej iz Francii vo glave s Mariani” [A delegation of observers from France headed by Mariani will come to the elections in Crimea], RIA Novosti, March 16, 2018, <https://crimea.ria.ru/politics/20180316/1114035257.html>.

27 “V Krym pribyla delegacija evropejskih deputatov” [Delegation of European deputies arrived in Crimea], Izvestia, June 30, 2020, <https://iz.ru/1029940/2020-06-30/v-krym-pribyla-delegacija-evropejskih-deputatov>; Anton Shekhovtsov, “Moscow using far right to infiltrate EU parliament,” EuObserver, May 5, 2021, <https://euobserver.com/investigations/151679>.

28 “Evroparlament nakazal 8 deputatov za fejkovye nabljudatel’nye missii, v tom chisle v Krymu – SMI” [European Parliament punished 8 MPs for fake observation missions, including in Crimea - media], Evropejskaja Pravda, June 29, 2021, <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2021/06/29/7124937/>; Andrew Rettman, “MEPs blacklisted for fake election-monitoring trips”, EuObserver, June 28, 2021, <https://euobserver.com/democracy/152271>.

sponsors, and organizes events with participation by European right-wing politicians,<sup>29</sup> called this decision «Russophobic hysteria in a cleanup of dissidents.»<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, Mariani retains his seat in the European Parliament, where he is a member of the Identity and Democracy group.<sup>31</sup>

## PIERRE MALINOWSKI'S “NECROPOLITICAL DIPLOMACY”

Marion Maréchal was not alone at the May 9 parade, but in the company of her friend, Pierre Malinowski. Malinowski, known as the “French Indiana Jones” (as he was aptly nicknamed by Causeur journalists) and currently the director of the Foundation for Russian-French Historical Initiatives Development, moved to Moscow in 2017. Previously, he was a soldier in the French Army and an assistant to Jean-Marie Le Pen and National Rally MEP Aymeric Chauprade. He is alleged to have provided illegal assistance to French soldiers accused of transporting 700 kg of cocaine,<sup>32</sup> an incident that ended his career in the European Parliament, though he remained well-connected within the Franco-Russian establishment, while also building a successful career in the niche of international “necropolitical diplomacy.”

“Necropolitics” is a term used in social and political theory to refer to managing collective memory of the past and death in the context of national interests.<sup>33</sup> Malinowski materialized (and capitalized on) one of the pillars of the Putin regime’s Russian national idea—the memory of Russian military valor and imperial greatness, digging up—literally—material evidence of such greatness and using it as a pretext for the development of po-

litical relations between the two countries.

Malinowski has led several initiatives, including archaeological excavations of the places where Russian soldiers died during World War One near the French city of Reims and later dedicating a memorial to those soldiers, discovering the remains of a pilot of the Normandy-Niemen squadron in 2018, archaeological excavations of the Russian battle sites from the French invasion of Russia in 1812, and the Crimean War of 1853-1856.<sup>34</sup> The latter ended in 2020 with the burial of the remains of 150 French soldiers in the French cemetery in Sevastopol.

These and many other projects led by Malinowski are supported at the highest political levels: the vice president of his foundation is Yelizaveta Peskova, daughter of Vladimir Putin’s press secretary, Dmitry Peskov. Malinowski himself can be seen with current and former Russian ministers, regional politicians, officials, and cultural figures close to Putin.<sup>35</sup> He has visited the Russian-occupied territories in Ukrainian Donbas several times.<sup>36</sup> He was also invited to the Vladimir Putin’s inauguration at the Kremlin in 2018. In 2021, he attended the Moscow Victory Day Parade for the fifth time. For all of his work, Malinowski was awarded the Russian Ministry of Defense’s medal “For Merit in Upholding the Memory of Fallen Defenders of the Homeland.”<sup>37</sup>

The two projects carried out by Malinowski’s Foundation in 2021 are an eloquent testimony to its unrelenting interest in political collaboration with the Kremlin. The first was the Stalingrad 2021 project, which aimed to organize a meeting in Moscow of Russian, French and American veterans who had taken part in the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-43, and to hold a solemn ceremony to bury the remains of Soviet soldiers found in the battlefield on Mamayev Kurgan. As Malinowski himself

29 Shekhovtsov, “Moscow using far right,” 2021; Anton Shekhovtsov, “European Council on Democracy and Human Rights: ‘Presidential election in Crimea is fair, free and legitimate’”, *Tango Noir*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.tango-noir.com/2018/01/29/european-council-on-democracy-and-human-rights-presidential-election-in-crimea-is-fair-free-and-legitimate/>.

30 “Sluckij nazval isključenje Mariani iz missii monitoringa vyborov zachistkoj inakomysljashih” [Slutsky called the exclusion of Mariani from the election monitoring mission a cleanup of dissidents], *TASS*, June 29, 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11780187>.

31 Thierry Mariani, *Groupe “Identité et démocratie”*, European Parliament, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/fr/197623/THIERRY\\_MARIANI/home](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/fr/197623/THIERRY_MARIANI/home).

32 Marlene Laruelle and Ellen Rivera, “Collusion or Homegrown Collaboration? Connections between German Far Right and Russia”, *Illiberalism.org*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.illiberalism.org/collusion-or-homegrown-collaboration-connections-between-german-far-right-and-russia/#143>.

33 Marina Grzinic, Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 2.

34 “Finished projects,” *Fond razvitiija rusko-francuzskih istoricheskikh iniciativ* [Foundation for the Development of Russian-French Historical Initiatives], <https://french-russia-historical-fund.com/project>.

35 Jean-Charles Robin, “Fachosphere: Pierre Malinowski,” *La Philosophie*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.la-philosophie.fr/fachosphere/pierre-malinowski.html>.

36 Aleksandra Nagiba, “P’er Malinovskij: mir v Donbasse nevygoden ni Evrope, ni Amerike” [Pierre Malinovsky: peace in Donbass is unprofitable for neither Europe nor America], *Baltnews*, September 18, 2018, <https://baltnews.ee/authors/20180918/1016946071.html>.

37 “P’er Malinovskij. Prezident Fonda” [Pierre Malinowski. President of the Foundation], *Fond razvitiija rusko-francuzskih istoricheskikh iniciativ*, <https://french-russia-historical-fund.com/president>.

admitted in April 2021 during an interview with Alexei Venediktov on the air with Russian radio station Echo of Moscow, this was not an easy task, as French bureaucrats questioned whether it made sense to organize a trip for veterans who are now nearly 100 years old in the middle of a pandemic.<sup>38</sup>

However, ever the enterprising Russophile, Malinkowski managed to overcome all of these obstacles, and the ceremonies took place as he had designed them, with the participation of three veterans from France, the United States, and Russia, along with two members of the de Gaulle family, Sarkozy government minister Maurice Leroy (who is now growing his business in Russia), and Xavier Emmanuelli, who is the founder and former head of Médecins Sans Frontières, creator of the Samusocial International ambulance service for homeless people, and former French Minister of Emergencies.<sup>39</sup>

Malinowski's foundation also envisioned meetings at a much higher political level and Vladimir Putin making a visit to France to transport the ashes of Napoleonic General Charles-Etienne Gooden, who died near Smolensk in 1812, to his homeland. Malinowski found Gooden's remains in 2019 and was able to provide evidence of their authenticity. The ceremony was planned for 2021, and well-timed, as May 5th was the 200th anniversary of Napoleon Bonaparte's death. according to Mediapart, the event was supported by Malinkowski's old friend Jean-Marie Le Pen.

However, this beautifully conceived meeting of the

two leaders for a grandiose historical event never actually happened—Macron refused to be present at the arrival of Gooden's remains, and the meeting ceremony in the general's historical homeland was subdued<sup>40</sup>—in stark contrast to the elaborate and costumed farewell that had been organized in Russia.<sup>41</sup> The plane for transportation was also provided by the Russians, courtesy of oligarch Andrey Kozitsyn.<sup>42</sup> Along with the remains of the French general, the Russian plane brought the president of the Franco-Russian Chamber of Commerce Emmanuel Quidet, former Minister of City Affairs Maurice Leroy, who is currently overseeing the "big Moscow" project,<sup>43</sup> and Yelizaveta Peskova.<sup>44</sup>

According to Malinkowski himself<sup>45</sup> and the French press<sup>46</sup>, the reason behind Paris's sudden loss of enthusiasm for the event was the deterioration of bilateral relations following the poisoning of Navalny and his subsequent imprisonment, and Russian policies in both Ukraine and Syria.

Malinowski, however, is still keen on further development of his impressively ambitious and wide-ranging necropolitical project. He intends to develop cooperation between France, Russia, and Israel and search for the burial place of the knights-crusaders who died in the Battle of Hattin in 1187; search for the bodies of British Admiral David Powell Price and French lieutenants Bourasse and Lefebvre in Kamchatka; carry out excavations in the French commune of Courcy; and do further work on the blockade of Leningrad and the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup>

38 "P'er Malinovskij i Aleksej Venediktov: intervju" [Pierre Malinowski and Alexey Venediktov: interview], Ekho Moskvy, May 4, 2021, <https://youtu.be/OUGR6cJeZnQ>.

39 François Malye, Marc Leplongeon, "Le Point (Francija): P'er Malinovskij, francuz, inscenirujushhij Stalingradskuju bitvu" [Le Point (France): Pierre Malinowski, French, staging the Battle of Stalingrad], INOSMI, May 13, 2021, <https://inosmi.ru/social/20210513/249703988.html>.

40 Alison Hird, "From Russia with love: Remains of Napoleon's missing general return to France", RFI, July 13, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20210713-from-russia-with-love-remains-of-napoleon-s-missing-general-return-to-france-gudin-malinowski-le-pen>.

41 "Ostanki generala Gjudena otpravili iz Moskvy v Parizh" [The remains of General Guden were sent from Moscow to Paris], RT, July 13, 2021, <https://russian.rt.com/science/news/884886-ostanki-general-a-gyudena-parizh>.

42 Amaury Coutansais Pervinquier, "Le retour en France de la dépouille d'un général de Napoléon crée la polémique", Le Figaro, July 6, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/le-retour-en-france-de-la-depouille-d-un-general-de-napoleon-cree-la-polemique-20210706>.

43 Paul Gogo, "Retour discret en France d'un général napoléonien mort en Russie", Le Monde, Juillet 15, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/07/13/retour-discret-en-france-d-un-general-napoleonien-mort-en-russie\\_6088137\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/07/13/retour-discret-en-france-d-un-general-napoleonien-mort-en-russie_6088137_3210.html).

44 Pierre Malinowski, Facebook, July 13, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/pierre.malinowski.Z>.

45 Jean-Baptiste Mendes, "Une formidable occasion manquée: commémorer Napoléon aurait pu se faire avec Vladimir Poutine", Sputnik France, May 6, 2021, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/international/202105061045562493-une-formidable-occasion-manquee-commemorer-napoleon-aurait-pu-se-faire-avec-vladimir-poutine/>.

46 Pervinquier, "Le retour en France de la dépouille d'un général de Napoléon crée la polémique", Le Figaro, July 6, 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/le-retour-en-france-de-la-depouille-d-un-general-de-napoleon-cree-la-polemique-20210706>; Victor Boiteau, "Pierre Malinowski, le sulfureux 'archéologue' qui veut rapprocher Macron et Poutine", Liberation, juillet, 13, 2021, [https://www.liberation.fr/societe/pierre-malinowski-le-sulfureux-archeologue-fana-de-napoleon-qui-veut-rapprocher-macron-et-poutine-20210713\\_6Z3SF3WQBVGIZE6UN537HORYEI/](https://www.liberation.fr/societe/pierre-malinowski-le-sulfureux-archeologue-fana-de-napoleon-qui-veut-rapprocher-macron-et-poutine-20210713_6Z3SF3WQBVGIZE6UN537HORYEI/); Gogo, "Retour discret en France d'un général napoléonien mort en Russie", 2021; Frederic de Natal, "Le général Gudin, histoire d'un rendez-vous manqué", Causeur, Juillet 13, 2021, <https://www.causeur.fr/le-general-gudin-pierre-malinowski-depouille-russie-205849>; François d'Orcival, "Macron, Poutine, la réconciliation manquée", Valeurs Actuelles, Mai 1, 2021, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/clubvaleurs/politique/macron-poutine-la-reconciliation-manquee/>.

47 "Budushie proekty" [Future Projects], Fond razvitiya russko-francuzskih istoricheskikh iniciativ, <https://french-russia-historical-fund.com/future>.

## RIGHT-WING MEDIA AND THEIR NARRATIVES

On November 11-12, 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov went on a working visit to France to participate in the Second Paris Peace Forum, as well as to meet with representatives of “French civil society.”<sup>48</sup> After this meeting, a photo was published on the official Twitter account of the Russian Foreign Ministry,<sup>49</sup> which helped identify the French participants.

According to Conspiracy Watch, the meeting with Sergei Lavrov was attended by Bertrand Pillet, the host of the YouTube channel ThinkerView and commentator for the ReOpen911 conspiracy forum under the pseudonym Sky; Olivier Berruyer, the editor-in-chief of the conspiracy site La Crise; André Bercoff; Philippe Migault, the director of the European Center for Strategic Analysis; and journalist Claude Chollet, who also collaborates with Russian propaganda channel RT; Dmitri de Kochko, the Chairman of the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in France; Lauren Poulter du Mesnil, the Vice President of the Franco-Russian Alliance and host of French Life on Courtousie Radio; Michel Jacques Larive, member of the far-left Rebellious France party; and social activist Maxime Antonio Raynald da Silva. Both Larive and Raynald da Silva are known to be active participants in the Yellow Vests protest movement.<sup>50</sup>

Most of these figures have repeatedly appeared

as commentators on the Kremlin’s Sputnik France and RT France channels, but some of them, for example, the blogger Sky, prefer to develop their own channels for media influence.

Sky has invited the adviser-envoy of Russia to France, Artyom Studennikov, to his “studio” several times to discuss the Skripal poisoning, Cold War politics,<sup>51</sup> US-Russia relations the context of terrorism, geopolitics<sup>52</sup>, and finance.<sup>53</sup> In 2018, Sky also hosted Allain Juillet,<sup>54</sup> a former French foreign intelligence director who now works for RT.

Other participants at the 2019 meeting with Lavrov have also appeared in Sky’s videos.

Olivier Berruyer discussed geopolitics and Russia in 2015,<sup>55</sup> the degradation of the United States in 2017,<sup>56</sup> the Yellow Vests movement, and the collapse of the EU in 2019.<sup>57</sup> As of July 2021, the latter video has been viewed a million times and serves a great example of Sputnik and RT’s successful tactic of growing their audience through active discussion of “Yellow Vests” in articles and shows.<sup>58</sup> Berruyer’s media resource “Les Crises” positions itself as a source of alternative news exposing the alleged bias of companies like EUObserver or Conspiracy Watch, which look for fake news in the right-wing media.<sup>59</sup>

In 2019, Artyom Studennikov was also invited to the radio program «Courtoisie» to discuss nuclear policy with Lauren Poulter du Mesnil, who who also took part in

48 “O rabochem vizite Ministra inostrannyh del Rossii S.V.Lavrova vo Franciju” [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s working visit to France], Russian Embassy in France, November 13, 2019, [https://france.mid.ru/ru/presse/lavrov\\_france/](https://france.mid.ru/ru/presse/lavrov_france/).

49 Conspiracy Watch, Twitter, November 15, 2019, <https://twitter.com/conspiration/status/1195327601214140416>.

50 “Les réseaux du Kremlin n’existent pas, mais nous les avons rencontrés... #Thinkerview #Berruyer #Giletsjaunes #AFD”, Journal d’une #ANTIFA, [gauchedecombat.net](https://gauchedecombat.net/2019/11/19/les-reseaux-du-kremlin-nexistent-pas-mais-nous-les-avons-rencontres-thinkerview-berruyer-giletsjaunes-afd/), November 19, 2019, <https://gauchedecombat.net/2019/11/19/les-reseaux-du-kremlin-nexistent-pas-mais-nous-les-avons-rencontres-thinkerview-berruyer-giletsjaunes-afd/>.

51 ThinkerView, “Interview d’Artem Studennikov, Ministre Conseiller de l’Ambassade de Russie, en direct à 19h, le 09/04/2018. Ambassade de Russie, Espions, Guerre Froide sans filtre”, YouTube, April 9, 2018, <https://youtu.be/-iiXPA6Ux2Q>; ThinkerView, “Ambassade de Russie: Acte 2, Espions, Guerre Froide sans filtre”, YouTube, September 27, 2019, <https://youtu.be/bOR1bSFxUsl>.

52 ThinkerView, “US-Russia: Geopolitical Tensions and Terrorism. Interview with Artem Studennikov”, YouTube, October 7, 2016, <https://youtu.be/N845HBEzzGY>.

53 ThinkerView, “Géopolitique, Russie, Terrorisme, Finance”, YouTube, November 21, 2015, <https://youtu.be/fzF7mPpsFQI>.

54 ThinkerView, “DGSE, Espions, Secrets des Affaires, Crises mondiales. Interview de Alain Juillet”, YouTube, April 7, 2018, <https://youtu.be/AjM8TpMs01Y>.

55 ThinkerView, “S-Russia: Geopolitical Tensions and Terrorism”, YouTube, October 10, 2016, <https://youtu.be/N845HBEzzGY>.

56 ThinkerView, “Remarquable Olivier Berruyer: les USA pillés par les 1%”, La chaîne qui libère, YouTube, September 6, 2017, [https://youtu.be/VywB2SXWi\\_I](https://youtu.be/VywB2SXWi_I).

57 ThinkerView, “Gilets Jaunes: le début de la fin pour l’UE?”, YouTube, January 16, 2019, <https://youtu.be/OoJ2fCJxAyy>.

58 Anastasiya Kirilenko, “V nuzhnoe vremja v nuzhnom meste: Kak RT France i Sputnik uglublajut raskol francuzskogo obshhestva” [At the Right Time in the Right Place: How RT France and Sputnik are deepening the rift in French society], The Insider, October 6, 2020, <https://theins.ru/politika/234910>; Anastasiya Kirilenko, “Advokaty d’javola. Kak Kreml’ zdejstvoval svoju set’ vo Francii, dokazyvaj v sude, chto kremljevskoj seti vo Francii net” [The devil’s advocates. How the Kremlin used its network in France to prove in court that there is no Kremlin network in France], The Insider, March 15, 2019, <https://theins.ru/antifake/147120>.

59 Olivier Berruyer, “Conspiracy Watch: La fabrication de la Fake News des 79 % de Français complotistes”, Les crises, Février 10, 2019, <https://www.les-crisis.fr/la-fabrication-de-la-fake-news-des-80-de-francais-complotistes/>.

the meeting with Lavrov.<sup>60</sup>

André Berkoff is another person on the “Lavrov list,” who actively promotes right-wing populist ideas. On his Sud Radio show, among other topics, he discussed the origin of the Covid-19 virus,<sup>61</sup> the merits of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine,<sup>62</sup> and the details of Navalny’s poisoning<sup>63</sup>—all within the framework of conspiracy theories. In addition to Sud Radio, Berkoff also collaborates with the far-right magazine *Valeurs Actuelles*.

The topics discussed in the magazine show us the typical discourse of the modern French right—anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant sentiments, fears of losing their “true” national identity, criticism of the “tyranny” of the current government and police state, and conspiracy theories.

Sputnik France and RT often use these topics and actively promote them in articles in order to foster a sense of instability, insecurity and fear among their audience. One good example of this is the letter to Emmanuel Macron published in April this year and signed by twenty former generals and over one thousand officers,<sup>64</sup> which was viewed by some French media as a threat of a “military coup.”<sup>65</sup>

The letter appeared on the 60th anniversary of a failed coup led by French generals in 1961, which was provoked by the desire to preserve the “French Algeria,” which was embroiled in a fight for independence. The generals’ letter, dated April 21, 2021, also raises the subject of France’s disintegration as a result of “discrimination” against its own culture and civilization, disguised as a fight against racism. This letter expresses the right-wing position when it comes to values and principles of France

as a secular country,<sup>66</sup> and serves as a response to Macron’s statement on the need to “reconstruct the history” of France. According to the president, “reconstruction” is necessary to rid French society of the remnants of colonial thinking,<sup>67</sup> and the initiative itself arose due to the public outcry following murder of history teacher Samuel Paty by a Muslim religious fanatic in October 2020. The letter’s authors warn that such “connivance” on the part of the state will lead to an outbreak of complete chaos and civil war in France, that they will not allow any “reconstruction” to take place, and that they are speaking out in “defense of our traditional values and compatriots.”<sup>68</sup>

Both Marine Le Pen and Marion Maréchal supported the generals’ position, stating that the “native French” are disappearing, and by 2050 they may find themselves a minority<sup>69</sup>, which is why they believe it is necessary to support Le Pen’s candidacy for the presidency “in the unfolding battle” for the country.<sup>70</sup>

The letter does not contain any new narratives from the French right-wing community. Three years ago, in December 2018, the right-wing website Infowars published information claiming that France had signed the so-called «Marrakesh Pact» on immigration, along with an open letter from ultra-conservative former French generals accusing Macron of «treason,» claiming that he “unilaterally» makes decisions that pose an existential threat to national security and French civilization in general. The article also discussed the threat of a coup or civil war, as «the French have another reason to rebel,» and the country had already been shaken by the Yellow Vests movement for several weeks.<sup>71</sup>

60 Courtoisie Radio, “Ministre-conseiller de l’Ambassade de Russie en France M. Artem Studennikov,” Ambassade de Russie en France, YouTube, February 13, 2019, <https://youtu.be/llsVNWSrZoE>.

61 “Brice Perrier: “Un conflit d’intérêt énorme” pour celui qui enquête sur le laboratoire de Wuhan”, Sud Radio, Mai 25, 2021, <https://www.sudradio.fr/societe/brice-perrier-un-conflit-dinteret-enerme-pour-celui-qui-enquete-sur-le-laboratoire-de-wuhan/>.

62 “Pourquoi ne parle-t-on pas du vaccin russe: Sputnik V?”, Sud Radio, December 16, 2020, <https://youtu.be/VR3uhflfhMU>.

63 “Navalny, oeil de Washington ou opposant martyr? Les vérités de Jacques Baud,” Sud Radio, July 1, 2021, <https://youtu.be/Y6OVuqGNek>.

64 Fabre-Bernadac, “Pour un retour de l’honneur de nos gouvernants.”

65 Jean-Pierre Fabre-Bernadac, “Pour un retour de l’honneur de nos gouvernants: 20 généraux appellent Macron à défendre le patriotisme,” Valeurs Actuelles, Avril 21, 2021, <https://www.aa.com/fr/politique/france-au-60e-anniversaire-dune-tentative-de-putsch-des-generaux-francais-publient-une-lettre-inquietante/2219124>.

66 “La République en actes: discours du Président de la République sur le thème de la lutte contre les séparatismes,” Élysée, Octobre 2, 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/10/02/la-republique-en-actes-discours-du-president-de-la-republique-sur-le-theme-de-la-lutte-contre-les-separatismes>.

67 “Nous devons déconstruire notre propre histoire”: Macron se lâche à la télévision américaine,” Valeurs Actuelles, Avril 19, 2021, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/video-nous-devons-deconstruire-notre-propre-histoire-macron-se-lache-a-la-television-americaine/>.

68 Jean-Pierre Fabre-Bernadac, “Pour un retour de l’honneur de nos gouvernants: 20 généraux appellent Macron à défendre le patriotisme,” Valeurs Actuelles, Avril 21, 2021, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/pour-un-retour-de-lhonneur-de-nos-gouvernants-20-generaux-appellent-macron-a-defendre-le-patriotisme/>.

69 “Marion Maréchal déplore que ‘les Français de souche seront minoritaires autour de 2050,’” Valeurs Actuelles, Mai 17, 2021, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/societe/video-marion-marechal-deploire-que-les-francais-de-souche-seront-minoritaires-autour-de-2050/>.

70 Marine Le Pen, “Marine Le Pen: ‘Messieurs les généraux, rejoignez-moi dans la bataille pour la France,’” Valeurs Actuelles, Avril 23, 2021, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/marine-le-pen-messieurs-les-generaux-rejoignez-moi-dans-la-bataille-pour-la-france/>.

71 “Pacte de Marrakech: Emmanuel Macron accusé de ‘trahison’ par des généraux,” RT France, Décembre 15, 2018, <https://francais.rt.com/france/56920-pacte-marrakech-emmanuel-macron-accuse-de-trahison-par-generaux>.

Both letters were signed by retired General Christian Piquemal, who was fired from the French Army and became popular in the media after his 2016 arrest for anti-immigrant protests.<sup>72</sup> Both Sputnik France and RT exalted him as a hero and a likable “patriot of France,” who personified all French right-wing activists.<sup>73</sup> In 2021, Kremlin media replicated the same tactic, hinting that France faced many problems and was mired in chaos, but that this could be resolved by a strong and military-minded president.<sup>74</sup> This narrative, which subtly hints at the “positive experience” of Russia’s “strong president,” is a vivid example of a Russian information influence strategy.

## THE KREMLIN ATTACKS AND LOSES

Meanwhile, there are other topics and areas where the Kremlin’s propagandists aim to manipulate the French public but seem to end up losing their bearings. One of them is the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, which has not yet been recognized by the European Medicines Commission, and by extension, France.<sup>75</sup> For Russia, however, the recognition of Sputnik V in Europe is a matter of geopolitical importance<sup>76</sup> though it is currently unable to provide enough vaccines for its own population, it continues to sign various supply contracts it cannot possibly hope to fulfill.<sup>77</sup> Former World Health Organization inspector Micha Rumiantzeff describes Sputnik V as “a tool of geopolitics”. He continues, “France, the United

Kingdom, and the United States are producing vaccines for their populations and donating the surplus to poorer countries. Russia has a wholly different attitude. It exports.”<sup>78</sup>

Meanwhile, Moscow is actively trying to promote Sputnik V in France through official appeals (such as the letter of members of the Franco-Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry)<sup>79</sup> by creating a positive image of the vaccine<sup>80</sup> or disinformation campaigns<sup>81</sup> accusing countries that have not recognized Sputnik V of Russophobia or racism.<sup>82</sup>

To promote Sputnik V, Moscow uses its own media platforms—Sputnik France and RT France—as well as loyal media figures who will use their platforms to discuss the Russian vaccine’s efficacy and why France needs it.

In May of this year, reports appeared in the French media about an attempt to spread further disinformation about vaccines recognized in Europe. Researchers have pinpointed it as a poorly disguised Russian attempt at disinformation.

Notably, Leo Grasset, a French-language YouTuber with over one million subscribers, states that on May 19, 2021, he received a letter to his official email from an individual identified only as Anton, who introduced himself as an employee of Fazze communications agency and offered to promote an «official report» that the death rate from the Pfizer vaccine is 3 times higher than that of AstraZeneca. Grasset was alarmed by the grammatical errors in the correspondence and Anton’s insistence at remaining anonymous, as well as his explanation for

72 Solène Cordier, “Le général Piquemal, pourfendeur de ‘a décadence de la France,’” *Le Monde*, Février 8, 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/02/08/le-general-piquemal-pourfendeur-de-la-decadence-de-la-france\\_4861543\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/02/08/le-general-piquemal-pourfendeur-de-la-decadence-de-la-france_4861543_3224.html).

73 “L’ancien patron de la Légion étrangère le général Piquemal arrêté à Calais,” *Sputnik France*, Février 7, 2016, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/france/201602071021550147-piquemal-arrete-calais/>; “Général Piquemal,” *RT France*, <https://francais.rt.com/en-ce-moment/15268-general-piquemal>.

74 Viktorija Nikiforova, “Francuzam prigrozili voennym perevorotom. Oni ne ispugalis,” *Sputnik Latvia*, April 29, 2021, <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20210429/Frantsuzam-prigrozili-voennym-perevorotom-Oni-ne-ispugalis-15590270.html>; “La ministre des Armées demande des sanctions contre les militaires ayant signé une tribune,” *Sputnik France*, Avril 27, 2021, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/politique-francaise/202104271045526422-tribune-de-militaires-la-ministre-des-armees-demande-des-sanctions/>.

75 Paul Louis, “Le vaccin Spoutnik v ne sera pas reconnu par le pass sanitaire européen,” *BFM Business*, May 24, 2021, [https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/economie-social/union-europeenne/le-vaccin-spoutnik-v-ne-sera-pas-reconnu-par-le-pass-sanitaire-europeen\\_AV-202105240122.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/economie-social/union-europeenne/le-vaccin-spoutnik-v-ne-sera-pas-reconnu-par-le-pass-sanitaire-europeen_AV-202105240122.html).

76 Louis, “Le Vaccin Spoutnik V.”

77 “A Chronicle of Kremlin contradictions,” *EUvsDisinfo*, June 24, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/a-chronicle-of-kremlin-contradictions/?highlight=vaccine%20desinformation>.

78 Philippe Reltien et Cellule investigation de Radio France, “Vaccin russe Spoutnik V: pourquoi l’Europe l’attend toujours?,” *France Culture*, Juin 25, 2021, <https://www.franceculture.fr/sciences/vaccin-russe-spoutnik-v-pourquoi-leurope-lattend-toujours>.

79 “Sovmestnoe zayavlenie CCI France Russie i CCEF o problemah s polucheniem “sanitarnogo propuska” vo Francii,” [Joint statement by SDI France Roussier and CSEF on problems with obtaining a “health pass” in France], *CCI France Russie*, July 16, 2021, <https://www.ccifr.ru/news/sovmetnoe-zayavlenie-cci-france-russie-i-ccef-o-problemah-s-polucheniem-sanitarnogo-propuska-vo-frantsii>.

80 Ekaterina Kopylova, “Paris-Moscou, aller simple pour une vie normale,” *Valeurs Actuelles*, Mars 25, 2021, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/monde/paris-moscou-aller-simple-pour-une-vie-normale/>.

81 Benoît Vitkine, “Face au Covid-19, la Russie a fait un choix millénaire: l’Etat plutôt que le citoyen,” *Le Monde*, Avril 9, 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/04/09/face-au-covid-19-la-russie-a-fait-un-choix-millenaire-l-etat-contre-le-citoyen\\_6076118\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/04/09/face-au-covid-19-la-russie-a-fait-un-choix-millenaire-l-etat-contre-le-citoyen_6076118_3232.html).

82 “Hégémonisme impérial: Moscou condamne des déclarations françaises hostiles au vaccin Spoutnik V,” *RT France*, Juillet 8, 2021, <https://francais.rt.com/international/88587-hegemonisme-imperial-moscou-condamne-declarations-hostiles-vaccin-russe-spoutnik-v>.

why this information was being “withheld” from the public (allegedly, the EU had bought a large amount of Pfizer vaccine, and it had to be used up).<sup>83</sup>

On May 20, 2021, the “Et ça se dit Médecin” (“And they call themselves doctors”) account, which has 30,000 followers on Twitter and 90,000 on Instagram, also reported that it had been contacted by an agency seeking to discredit the Pfizer vaccine through the same methods that had been explained to Grasset. Further investigation by independent journalists from Numerama revealed that the address of the “agency” was fake, and indirect evidence suggested that it was in fact based in Russia. Numerama notes that there is no direct evidence of Russian influence in this situation, since there was no request from the “agency” to directly promote the Russian Sputnik V vaccine.<sup>84</sup> Paris officials have not named the source of the disinformation, and although this attempt was “dangerous,” according to French Minister of Health Olivier Véran, it “failed.”<sup>85</sup>

Russia is also known to attack French cybersecurity. On February 15, 2021, the French National Agency for Information Systems Security (ANSSI) announced a massive attempt to hack into software of the company Centreon. Centreon’s clients include major French companies as Airbus, Air France, Thales, ArcelorMittal, Électricité de France, television provider Orange, and the French Ministry of Justice. ANSSI described the attempted attack as similar to the methods used by the SandWorm hacker group, whose activities are associated with the Russian special services.<sup>86</sup> SandWorm is credited with

interfering in the 2016 US presidential election; attacks on American healthcare systems in 2017 (Operation NotPetya) and Ukraine’s power systems in 2016, campaigns against the media and parliament of Georgia in 2018 and 2019, German media ZDF and WDR in 2018,<sup>87</sup> the organizers of the Winter Olympic Games in South Korea in 2018,<sup>88</sup> and the office of future French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017.<sup>89</sup> France 24 writes that the French authorities themselves are traditionally reluctant to publicly admit Russian cyber interference in their internal affairs.<sup>90</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The upcoming 2022 presidential elections in France are a critical event in a country that has been deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and is sorely in need of effective public management. The French elections are also crucial for Moscow, which has a very real chance to see a loyal candidate win the presidency. In July of this year, massive protests with participants numbering well over 100,000 swept France following the Macron government’s introduction of so-called “health passports”. Events like this are the perfect catalyst<sup>91</sup> for French right-wing forces to harness criticism of “Macronism” and “tyranny.”<sup>92</sup>

French and Russian history are tightly intertwined, and many a French communist or socialist sympathizer has a collection of Dostoevsky’s works on his or her nightstand. Yet, this is not the reason why France is vulnerable to Russian

83 DirtyBiology, “Comment une agence russe a essayé de m’utiliser - DBY #79”, YouTube, June 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEuWVgh-d6Q>.

84 Julien Cadot, “Une mystérieuse agence demande à des influenceurs français de dénigrer le vaccin Pfizer,” Numertama, Mai 24, 2021, <https://www.numerama.com/sciences/713667-une-mysterieuse-agence-demande-a-des-influenceurs-francais-de-denigrer-le-vaccin-pfizer.html>.

85 Stéphane Mahe, “France blasts ‘pathetic’ attempts to discredit Pfizer vaccine online,” Reuters, May 25, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/france-blasts-pathetic-attempts-discredit-pfizer-vaccine-online-2021-05-25/>.

86 Laurens Cerulus, “France identifies Russia-linked hackers in large cyberattack,” Politico, July 30, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-cyber-agency-russia-attack-security-anssi/>; Laurens Cerulus and Elisa Braun, “In a first, EU slaps sanctions on hackers in Russia, North Korea, China,” Politico, June 30, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-slaps-sanctions-on-hackers-in-russia-north-korea-china/>.

87 Sergej Romashenko, “Nemeckie mediakompanii podverglis’ atake rossijskih hakerov” [German media attacked by Russian hackers], Deutsche Welle, July 27, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/ru/немецкие-медиакомпании-подверглись-атаке-российских-хакеров/a-44852303>.

88 Andy Greenberg, “We need to hold the Kremlin responsible for its 2018 cyberattack on the Olympics,” The Washington Post, December 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/04/we-need-to-hold-kremlin-responsible-its-cyberattack-olympics/>.

89 “Six Russian GRU Officers Charged in Connection with Worldwide Deployment of Destructive Malware and Other Disruptive Actions in Cyberspace,” The United States Department of Justice, October 19, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/six-russian-gru-officers-charged-connection-worldwide-deployment-destructive-malware-and>; Martin Untersinger, “Les preuves de l’ingérence russe dans la campagne de Macron en 2017,” Le Monde, Décembre 6, 2019, [https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2019/12/06/macronleaks-des-hackers-d-etat-russes-ont-bien-vise-la-campagne-presidentielle-de-2017\\_6021987\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2019/12/06/macronleaks-des-hackers-d-etat-russes-ont-bien-vise-la-campagne-presidentielle-de-2017_6021987_4408996.html)

90 Laurens Cerulus, “France identifies Russia-linked hackers in large cyberattack,” Politico, February 15, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-cyber-agency-russia-attack-security-anssi/>;

91 “Passe sanitaire: Marine Le Pen cautionne une tribune jugeant la liberté ‘menacée,’” France 24, July 15, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/fr/france/20210715-pass-sanitaire-marine-le-pen-cautionne-une-tribune-jugeant-la-liberte-menacee>; Marine le Pen, Twitter, July 15, 2021, [https://twitter.com/MLP\\_officiel/status/1415660900468629504](https://twitter.com/MLP_officiel/status/1415660900468629504).

92 “Suspected arsonists attack French vaccine centre,” News24, July 19, 2021, <https://www.news24.com/news24/world/news/suspected-arsonists-attack-french-vaccine-centre-20210719>.



influence. To use now-common medical parlance, France has weak “herd immunity” against Kremlin influence, unlike Estonia, Poland or Georgia, where we would be hard-pressed to imagine a situation like that of Sputnik or RT in France, which have been supported by French journalists in the name of universal freedom of speech,<sup>93</sup> despite official accusations of spreading propaganda.

This is encapsulated by French writer Jacques Baud in his book on the Navalny case, «the immediate imposition of sanctions, while the facts remain unclear, leaves no space for diplomacy.”<sup>94</sup> The Kremlin itself could not have phrased it better. France has access to its own vaccine against this kind of manipulation. The question is whether or not it will use it.

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93 Anastasija Kirilenko, “V nuzhnoe vremja v nuzhnom meste: Kak RT France i Sputnik uglublajut raskol francuzskogo obshhestva” [At the Right Time in the Right Place: How RT France and Sputnik are deepening the rift in French society], *The Insider*, October 6, 2020, <https://theins.ru/politika/234910>

94 Jacques Baud, “L’affaire Navalny – Le complotisme au service de la politique étrangère,” *Decitre*, <https://www.decitre.fr/livres/l-affaire-navalny-9782315009923.html>.



**RUSSIA'S CURRENT FOREIGN POLICY  
STRATEGY TOWARD UKRAINE  
AS THE NEW DOCTRINE  
OF LIMITED SOVEREIGNTY**

**Ihor Lossovskyi**





## ABOUT AUTHOR Ihor Lossovskiy

Ihor Lossovskiy is Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Envoy of Ukraine of the First Class, and former Deputy Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the International Organizations in Vienna (OSCE, IAEA, CTBTO, NSG, UNIDO, UNODC, and others).

## INTRODUCTION

Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2014 with attempts to annex Crimea and stage a military intervention in Donbas, unprecedented pressure on Ukraine, as well as open confrontation with the West, demonstrate that Russia is carrying out its planned strategy toward the countries in the post-Soviet space, in particular, Ukraine. This was laid out in a number of articles and speeches by President Vladimir Putin in 2014, and later detailed in the Russian Federation's fundamental policy and security documents.

A detailed political and security analysis of Russia's newly aggressive foreign policy, primarily with regard to neighboring countries in the post-Soviet space and especially toward Ukraine, inevitably leads to the talk of a reincarnation of the "limited sovereignty" foreign policy (the "Brezhnev Doctrine"), which the Soviet Union actively applied toward the so-called "People's Democracies" – the states of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as some other USSR satellite countries from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s.

## RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION TOWARD UKRAINE AND ITS COMPLIANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL LEGAL DEFINITIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF AGGRESSION

A content analysis of statements made by the Russian president and in the Russian Federation's program documents, along with Russia's current foreign policy and military activity going back to at least 2014, highlight Russia's ongoing modern foreign policy doctrine.<sup>1</sup> An aggressive foreign and security policy strategy against Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries that dared show a glimmer of independence is a key component of this doctrine, especially when it comes to Moscow's foreign policy and ideas about the contemporary international order on in what once represented "one-sixth of the Earth's land surface". Russia's regional activity is fully in line with the international legal definition of international,

1 Ihor Lossovskiy, "Zovnishnyopolitychna strategiya Putina yak nova doktryna obmezhenogo suverenitetu" [Putin's Foreign Policy Strategy as a New Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty], *Mizhnarodni vidnosyny*, No. 5, 2015, [http://journals.iir.kiev.ua/index.php/pol\\_n/article/view/2514](http://journals.iir.kiev.ua/index.php/pol_n/article/view/2514); Ihor Lossovskiy, "Zovnishnyopolitychna strategiya Rosii shchodo Ukrainy yak realizatsiya 'Novoi doktryny obmezhenogo suverenitetu' ('Doktryny Putina')", [Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy for Ukraine as an Implementation of the 'New Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty' ('Putin's Doctrine')], *Zovnishni spravy*, no. 5, 2015, pp. 12-15; no. 6, 2015, pp. 12-15; Ihor Lossovskiy, "Zovnishnyopolitychna strategiya Rosii shchodo krain postradyans'kogo prostoru yak realizatsiya novoi doktryny obmezhenoho suverenitetu [Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy for the Post-Soviet Space as an Implementation of a New Doctrine of Limited Sovereignty], *Strategichna Panorama*, No. 2, 2018, pp. 19-30.

political, and military aggression.<sup>2</sup>

At the USSR's initiative, the UN painstakingly prepared a General Assembly resolution to define the concept of "aggression". That document was adopted on December 14, 1974.<sup>3</sup> Article 1 of the resolution states: "Aggression is the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State".<sup>4</sup> Article 3 further defines what constitutes an act of aggression:

- (a) The invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State, or any military occupation, resulting from such invasion or attack, or any annexation by the use of force of the territory of another State or part thereof;
- (b) Bombardment by the armed forces of a State against the territory of another State or the use of any weapons by a State against the territory of another State;
- (c) The blockade of the ports or coasts of a State by the armed forces of another State;
- (d) An attack by the armed forces of a State on the land, sea or air forces of another State;
- (e) The use of armed forces of one State which are within the territory of another State with the agreement of the receiving State, in contravention of the conditions provided for in the agreement [...];
- (g) The sending by or on behalf of a State of armed bands, groups, irregulars or mercenaries, which carry out acts of armed force against another State.<sup>5</sup>

Russia's actions in Georgia in August 2008, its military presence in Ukraine since annexing the Crimean Peninsula (February 2014), and the intervention in Donbas fully meet the definition of aggression. Based on the definition of aggression adopted by the UN General Assembly (and not by a multilateral treaty), Russia is an aggressor state.

Prior to that definition, there was another definition of aggression stemming from an earlier international legal document – the London Convention, adopted on July 3-5, 1933 by 12 states at the League of Nations, includ-

ing the USSR, which actually initiated and even authored the draft text of that document.

The London Convention is an international treaty that imposes specific international legal obligations on its signatories, and it contains five criteria to define aggression. According to those criteria, the State that is the first to commit any of the following actions shall be recognized as an aggressor in an international conflict:

- declaration of war on another State;
- invasion the territory of another State by its Armed Forces, with or without declaring war;
- attack by its land, naval or air forces, with or without a declaration of war, on the territory, vessels or aircraft of another state;
- naval blockade of the coasts or ports of another State;
- provision of support to armed bands formed in its territory which have invaded the territory of another State, or refusal notwithstanding the request of the invaded State to take, in its own territory, all the measures in its power to deprive those bands of all assistance or protection.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, "no political, military, economic or other consideration may serve as an excuse or justification for the aggression"<sup>7</sup>. The 1933 convention has no expiration date and remains in force today for the signatory states and their successors, including the Russian Federation. One important feature of this document is that in December 1939, it was enforced when the League of Nations identified an act of aggression by the USSR against Finland (during the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939-1940, the so-called "Winter War") and excluded the Soviet Union from the organization. Thus, the 1933 convention is not only an international legal theory document, but also a valid international treaty with significant legal consequences for those that violate it.

The authors of the 1933 London Convention and the 1974 UN General Assembly Resolution were guided by the principles of classical warfare formulated by prominent Prussian military theorist and classical strategist Carl

2 Ihor Lossovskiy, "Do 20-oi richnytsi budapeshts'kykh 'garantii': Agresiya Rosii proty Ukrainy yak factor erozii mizhnarodno-pravovykh rezhymiv nerozповysudzhennya [For the 20th Anniversary of the Budapest 'Guarantees': Russia's Aggression against Ukraine as a Factor in the Erosion of International Legal Non-Proliferation Regimes,] *Zovnishni spravy*, 2014, No. 11, pp. 6-11; Ihor Lossovskiy, *Mizhnarodno-pravovy status Budapeshts'kogo Memorandumu [International Legal Status of the Budapest Memorandum]* (Kyiv: UAZP, 2015).

3 "3314 (XXIX) Definition of Aggression," *United Nations*, 14 December 1974, <https://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/023B908017CFB94385256EF4006EBB2A>.

4 "3314 (XXIX) Definition of Aggression."

5 "3314 (XXIX) Definition of Aggression."

6 "Convention for the Definition of Aggression," [http://heninen.net/sopimus/1933\\_e.htm](http://heninen.net/sopimus/1933_e.htm).

7 "Convention for the Definition of Aggression."

von Clausewitz in 1832<sup>8</sup>. Over the last seven-and-a-half years, Russia's military and political actions against Ukraine often been described by international experts and politicians as a "hybrid war," rather than a classical one.<sup>9</sup> However, even if we consider the factors of hybrid warfare, there is no doubt that Russia's actions fully meet the criteria of aggression.

## STATES' REAL AND LIMITED SOVEREIGNTY

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, right in the center of Europe, undermines the remnants of the Westphalian international system that emerged in 1648 as a result of the Thirty Years' War. Key principles of the Westphalian world order, which were in force until recently, include the priority of "nation-states", "national interests", and "national/state sovereignty"; a balance of forces and coalitions; and implementation of international treaties. The Yalta-Potsdam system, which was established after World War II, was another modification of the Westphalian world order that enabled the formation of a bipolar world, which revived the concept of "limited sovereignty" of states under the control of great powers. Only the two superpowers – the USA and the USSR – enjoyed any full or real sovereignty<sup>10</sup> in such a system. Limited sovereignty was given to their satellites – countries belonging to the two hostile blocs. As these countries were not completely independent in their foreign and domestic policies, they acted in accordance with the national interests and guidelines of the two superpowers. Restriction of sovereignty within the Western bloc was much milder than within the Eastern bloc. The ideology of the Communist bloc has been referred to by Western political scientists and politicians as the "Brezhnev Doctrine"<sup>11</sup>. The main provisions of that doctrine were formulated in the article "Sovereignty and International Responsibilities of Socialist Countries," published shortly after Communist defeat in the Prague Spring, on September 26, 1968 in *Pravda*, the official

newspaper of the USSR's Communist party<sup>12</sup>. Soviet foreign policy took a new direction. USSR leadership assumed the authority to interfere in the affairs of any Socialist countries that deviated from the pro-Soviet course. The main point was that each country's Communist Party was responsible not only for its own people but also for all other Socialist countries. Sovereignty of an individual country could not contradict the interests of global Socialism and the world's revolutionary movement.

Of course, Russia's aggression today does not actually reflect its real economic or other capabilities. Brandishing conventional weapons and making nuclear threats are an attempt to intimidate its neighbors, position itself as a large regional power, and regain its former status as a separate "pole," or at least a center of power in global politics.

## A NEW DOCTRINE OF LIMITED SOVEREIGNTY – THE "PUTIN DOCTRINE"

Russia's current policy toward Ukraine and other countries of the post-Soviet space is aggressive and, if we compare it to the Brezhnev Doctrine's notion of "limited sovereignty", creates a "new doctrine of limited sovereignty", which was actively developed during the annexation of Crimea and military aggression in Donbas in 2014. According to official data alone, the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas has claimed over 14,000 lives, and left over 30,000 people wounded. Information about the number of casualties among the Russian military and mercenaries has been classified since May 2015, when Vladimir Putin signed a decree that classified any information revealing the losses of the Russian Armed Forces "in peacetime during special operations". Previously, only information about losses during war was protected by Russian legislation.

There were some elements of "limited sovereignty" in the Monroe Doctrine, developed by Secretary of State and future US President John Adams in 1823, and which

8 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Oxford, USA: Oxford University Press, 2008).

9 See, for example, Volodymyr Horbulin (ed.), *The World Hybrid War: Ukrainian Front* (Kharkiv: "Folio", 2017); Peter Dickinson, "All Roads Lead to Ukraine in Putin's Global Hybrid War," *Atlantic Council*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/all-roads-lead-to-ukraine-in-putins-global-hybrid-war/>.

10 Andrey Kokoshin, *Real'ny suverenitet v sovremennoy miropoliticheskoy sisteme* [Real Sovereignty in Modern World Political System] (Moscow: "Evropa", 2006).

11 "Brezhnev Doctrine," *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Brezhnev-Doctrine>; Mark Kramer, "Beyond the Brezhnev Doctrine: A New Era in Soviet-East European Relations?," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1989-1990), pp. 25-67.

12 Dmitry Okunev, "Sotsializm v opasnosti: kak poyavilas' 'doktrina Brezhneva'" [Socialism in Danger: How the 'Brezhnev's Doctrine' Came about]," *Gazeta.ru*, September 26, 2018, [https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2018/09/26\\_a\\_11997739.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/science/2018/09/26_a_11997739.shtml).

became the basis of American expansion in the Western hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine was designed to legitimize Washington's direct and indirect interference in Latin America under the pretext of helping resolve internal conflicts. It guided the United States in its considerable efforts to subdue the continent to its interests, and its declaration to protect the region from potential aggression by European powers contributed to the consolidation of American hegemony. The Monroe Doctrine's nearly 200-year history ended in November 2013 at a summit of the Organization of American States, when Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the United States was officially rejecting it<sup>13</sup>. The main ideas and basic elements of the so-called "Putin Doctrine" were formulated in the Russian president's public speeches, in particular in the address to both chambers of the Russian Federal Assembly in connection with the "Offer of State Council of the Republic of Crimea on the accession of the republic to the Russian Federation" (the so-called "Crimea Statement" of March 18, 2014); the "Valdai speech" of October 24, 2014; and the appeal to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on December 04, 2014. On December 26, 2014, a new Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation<sup>14</sup> was adopted, which listed the main outside threats Russia faces, including "establishing regimes in neighboring states whose policies threaten Russia's interests". With this document, the Russian Federation sought to "legitimize" its future expansion at the expense of its neighbors. The main tasks of the Russian Armed Forces in peacetime include the "protection of Russian citizens outside the country from armed attack". This means that even in distant countries, Russian-speaking citizens have the right to military protection by the Russian Federation. According to Sergei Karaganov, one of the main ideologists of contemporary Russian foreign policy and Putin's personal adviser, "The main mistake of [Russia's] foreign policy in the past was the lack of any clear policy towards the post-Soviet space. The only thing Russia did was subsidizing and buying/corrupting of elites, which proved ineffective. As the conflict in Ukraine has shown,

it is impossible to get rid of the global crisis in this way"<sup>15</sup>. To properly understand the evolution of modern Russian foreign policy, it is important to analyze its concept document<sup>16</sup> approved by President Vladimir Putin in late 2016, as well as its previous editions from 2008 and 2013.

In 2016, for the first time, Russian ideologues conceptually divided the world into Asia-Pacific, Euro-Atlantic, and Eurasian regions. They considered the latter region to be within Russia's exclusive sphere of interests. That version of the concept introduced "soft power" as an integral part of modern international politics to solve foreign policy problems in addition to traditional diplomatic and "energy" methods. They paid considerable attention to the issue of a "clash of civilizations". The 2016 text does not mention Russia explicitly as an integral and organic part of European civilization, but there are serious accusations against the geopolitical expansion of the EU and NATO. Statements about the need to abandon the arms race also disappeared from the 2016 text. Instead, it includes a rather aggressive statement that Russia will not tolerate any pressure from the United States and will respond to any unfriendly actions. Speaking at the annual meeting of Russian ambassadors to foreign countries held in Moscow on July 19, 2018, Putin strongly stressed the inadmissibility of NATO military infrastructure approaching Russia's borders and Ukraine and Georgia being included in NATO's orbit, and the irresponsibility of such "aggressive steps", which pose a threat to Russia, as well as the inevitability of Russian retaliation. Thus, it was emphasized that Russia continues to view Ukraine and Georgia as part of its own national interests. Putin was openly threatening that if the West continues its policy of deterring Russia, local military conflicts could escalate into a single global catastrophe<sup>17</sup>.

According to the latest Strategy of National Security of the Russian Federation, adopted July 2, 2021<sup>18</sup>, "one of the main tasks of ensuring the defense of the Russian Federation is protecting the national interests and citizens of the Russian Federation outside its territory...In order to achieve the goals of its foreign policy, the Strategy,

13 "Remarks on U.S. Policy in the Western Hemisphere", US Department of State, 18 November 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/217680.htm>.

14 "Order of the President of the Russian Federation on Military Doctrine", 5 February 2010, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102135800>.

15 "Strategiya dlya Rossii. Rossiyskaya vneshnyaya politika: konets 2010-kh – nachalo 2020-kh godov [A Strategy for Russia: Russian Foreign Policy at the end of 2010s-beginning of 2020s]", Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, May 2016, [http://svop.ru/wp-intent/uploads/2016/05/%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%8B\\_23%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%8F\\_sm.pdf](http://svop.ru/wp-intent/uploads/2016/05/%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%8B_23%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%8F_sm.pdf).

16 "Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [The Concept of the Foreign Policy of Russian Federation]", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248).

17 "Strategiya dlya Rossii. Rossiyskaya vneshnyaya politika."

18 "Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 02.07.2021 No. 400 'O strategii natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii [On Strategy of the National Security of the Russian Federation]", President of Russia, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046>.

in particular, outlines the following tasks: assistance in eliminating and preventing the emergence of hotbeds of tension and conflicts in the territories of states neighboring the Russian Federation; increasing Russia's role in peacekeeping activities; supporting allies and partners in addressing defense and security issues". In both versions of the Strategy from 2016 and 2021, there are lists of strategic national priorities considered essential to ensuring Russia's national security. The 2021 includes "safeguarding the people of Russia and developing their human potential". Putin's regime regularly turns to such measures, along with illegally providing Russian passports for citizens of neighboring countries are frequent tactics in order to address the issue Russia's gradually decreasing population, or to destabilize those countries' internal political situations.

Putin's latest attack on Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity was his article, "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians", published in Russian and Ukrainian on the official website of the President of the Russian Federation on July 12, 2021<sup>19</sup>. The article was rife with historically nonsensical claims, such as, "...the republics that were founders of the Union, having denounced the 1922 Union Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union [...]. When you leave, take what you brought with you." He also compared the development of the Ukrainian state, which he described as "aggressive towards Russia," to the use of weapons of mass destruction against ethnic Russians. Finally, he presented Ukraine with an ominous ultimatum: "We will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia. And to those who will undertake such an attempt, I would like to say that this way they will destroy their own country."<sup>20</sup>

On July 25, 2018, the US State Department released Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement on Crimea, unequivocally condemning Russia's policy of intervention in Ukraine and attempts to annex Crimea, which undermine the foundations of the international world order and fundamental principles of international relations, to which Russia had made clear commitments to strict compliance. In the statement, the United States reaffirms its consistent policy of not recognizing the Kremlin's claims to sovereignty over territories seized by force and in violation of international law. It also mentioned the

politically similar declaration of Sumner Welles ("Welles Declaration") of July 23, 1940 on the United States' non-recognition of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's inclusion in the Soviet Union. In fact, the Russian Federation's aggressive policy toward its neighbors today is compared to the USSR's similar "unneighborly" policy. Since 2014, Russia's legislation and official regulations actually enshrine legitimizing exacerbating and continuing the war in eastern Ukraine, as well as possible further Russian expansion into adjacent territories in the future.

At least five domestic factors form the basis of Russia's current political regime and Putin's foreign policy "doctrine", namely: the consolidation of the authoritarian regime within the country, which significantly limits the political opposition's place and role; large-scale corruption at all levels, including at the highest level; the use of the country's vast energy and other natural resources both to maintain domestic political and economic stability and as a "weapon" <sup>21</sup> to guarantee foreign policy influence; a powerful and comprehensive propaganda machine that actively uses hybrid methods of information warfare (bluffing, misinformation, manipulation), both domestically and abroad; and the concept of legitimizing the use of Russian military force abroad "to protect Russian speakers". These fundamental components of the "Putin Doctrine" have not been officially proclaimed by the Russian leadership just as the "Brezhnev Doctrine" was not officially proclaimed in the USSR. However, we can outline the following in practical international activities, especially in the post-Soviet space:

- Russia does not see the collective West as a credible partner because, despite warnings in Putin's famous 2007 Munich speech, the US, NATO, and the EU continue to ignore Russia's vital, historical and regional interests in the post-Soviet space, spreading their influence and "dragging" the countries of the region into their own fold through a policy of "containing Russia";
- Russia does not see itself as part of the Euro-Atlantic community; it is a country of "sovereign", "controlled" democracy, with about 80% of the population supporting Putin's aggressive policy toward Ukraine, a foreign policy of "land acquisition", anti-Americanism, and confrontation with the West. It emphasizes that its own identity and that it belongs to a separate civilization that professes its own val-

19 "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,'" President of Russia, 12 July, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

20 "Article by Vladimir Putin."

21 Valery Panuyshkin, Mikhail Zygar, Gazprom: Novoe russkoe oruzhie [Gazprom: A New Russian Weapon] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2008).

ues system. The ideology of the “third way”, or the “third type of civilization”, and the revival of the notorious concept “Moscow as the Third Rome”<sup>22</sup> is gaining popularity again;

- Against a backdrop of a unipolar world order that is showing signs of weakening, as a new and multipolar (multicentric) world is being formed, Russia seeks both uncontrolled chaos and to do away with any rules of the game. This significantly expands the Kremlin’s boundaries of acceptable behavior on the world stage. Hence, Russia’s efforts to carry out hybrid interference in internal affairs, electoral processes, and referendums, both in the countries of its traditional “sphere of influence” and in the West (USA, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, etc.). The main tasks of such intervention are to achieve imbalance and destroy the West’s bodies for international integration (primarily the EU and NATO); erode and destroy a world order based on international law, universal values, and obligations; destroy Euro-Atlantic unity; impose a sense of frustration and doubt about the viability of liberal democratic values on broad masses of the European community and students in general;
- Generally speaking, Russia does not view the system of international treaties and international law as a system of rules and guidance for international relations; it is rather a sort of menu from which to select whatever is beneficial to Russia at any given moment in time<sup>23</sup>.

The role of international organizations is greatly diminished, as strong states lose any desire to cooperate with them once they begin to interfere in national interests. Russia operates on the principle of “For us – anything that benefits us, and for our opponents – international law”.

The concept of “national/state sovereignty” is relative for most states. Real sovereignty something enjoyed by exceptionally strong states. In one way or another, smaller states cede part of their sovereignty to either stronger allies or international security organizations. The

post-Soviet countries are effectively deprived of the right to real sovereignty, as they are only given “limited sovereignty” that does not contradict Russia’s vital interests. Such conceptual arguments are used to justify the legitimacy of Russia’s ongoing aggression in Ukraine and the attempted annexation of Crimea, the 2008 intervention in Georgia, Russia’s interference in political processes in Belarus starting in August 2020, and, at the same time, its failure to provide any constructive help over the last 30 years in seeking a sustainable settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The new world and European order that Putin is trying to impose expands Russia’s influence throughout the Baltics even beyond the post-Soviet space. One important factor here is the completion of the Nord Stream-2 pipeline, which will require expanding Russia’s naval presence in the Baltic Sea under the pretext of needing military protection. In the same way, the illegal construction of the Crimean Bridge across the Kerch Strait and the active and unlawful extraction of oil and gas on the Black Sea using drilling rigs pilfered from oil and gas fields that were brutally stolen from Ukraine “required” a significant increase in Russian military-naval presence and closing large areas in the Black Sea for navigation under the contrived pretext of protecting “Russia’s” infrastructure. Since the “new doctrine of limited sovereignty” refers to the basic categories of the Westphalian international system, when it comes to the growth of these new centers of power, this doctrine can be viewed as an attempt to further disfigure the Westphalian world order. Despite the fact that the Baltic states are full members of NATO, Russia continues to exert provocative pressure on them, testing the strength of the Alliance’s unity and continues to attempt to spread the “Putin Doctrine” to that region.

Many analysts believe that the next target of Russian aggression may be the Baltic states, possibly via a campaign to destabilize these countries through activities, military infiltration, media propaganda, cyber-attacks, information manipulation, and speculation about the “problems faced by the Russian-speaking population”<sup>24</sup>.

According to Adrian Bradshaw,<sup>25</sup> the former dep-

22 Vladislav Surkov, “The Loneliness of the Half-Breed,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, 28 May 2018, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-loneliness-of-the-half-breed/>.

23 Ihor Lossovskiy, “Dedicated to ‘Budapest memorandum: 25 years since nuclear weapons relinquishing’ panel discussion, an independently organized event scheduled to take place in Vienna on 20th of February 2020,” *Unlimited Democracy*, 22 February, 2020, <https://www.unlimiteddemocracy.com/analytics/budapest-memorandum>.

24 Cristian Rosu, “How Real Is the Russian Threat to the Baltic States?,” *New Europe*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/how-real-is-the-russian-threat-to-the-baltic-states/>.

25 “U NATO poradyly pidgotuvatsya do ‘mashtabnoi ataky Rosii’ na Evropu [NATO Has Advised to Prepare for a ‘Large-Scale Russian Attack’ on Europe],” *Korrespondent*, February 21, 2015, <https://ua.korrespondent.net/world/3482347-u-nato-poradyly-pidhotuvatsya-do-mashtabnoi-ataky-rosii-na-yevropu>.



uty supreme commander of NATO's Joint Forces in Europe, the Alliance must be prepared for a full-fledged Russian attack on member states: "Russia can believe that the large number of regular troops it can concentrate in the short term, like what we saw during the capture of Crimea, can be used in the future not only to intimidate and deter, but also to seize Alliance territory. NATO must adapt to the methods of hybrid warfare used by Russia in Ukraine". He compared Russia's behavior to the escalating dominance of the Soviet Union, saying that Russia could resort to further escalation of the conflict to avoid having to return already occupied territory. The Alliance's military leadership should take into account that Russia is acting contrary to international rules and norms; in recent years, the Russian Federation has significantly increased funding for its defense industry, including nuclear weapons; and the Russian regime actively and destructively uses disinformation campaigns.

Other post-Soviet countries with significant Russian-speaking populations, including Belarus and Kazakhstan, may be the next target of Russian external aggression to "protect" the "Russian world". Back in the autumn of 2014, Putin tried to test the reaction of these countries' leadership but received a rather sharp response from both, who emphasized their independence and sovereignty from Russia<sup>26</sup>. Today, Russia is actively interfering in the political process in Belarus, in the context of unprecedented protests following the undemocratic and unfair presidential election held on August 9, 2020.

Putin's threat is far greater than that posed by the Islamic State, as victory over IS depended only on the amount of resources allocated to it. Russia, on the other hand, has a nuclear arsenal and its strategy is to continue its imperial expansionist policy in the post-Soviet space through military force and powerful propaganda, as well

as attempts to destroy the international security system by undermining unity within NATO and the EU, through the outright bribery of elites in individual countries, or financial support for radical and marginal European political parties. For over 20 years, Russia's de facto form of government has been a personal dictatorship. This is summed up well by the former deputy head of the Putin administration and current chairperson of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin, who noted that, "As long as there is Putin, there is Russia; if there is no Putin, there is no Russia."<sup>27</sup> Russia's system of government is unstable, so it requires constant personal intervention by Putin, whose authority is markedly and steadily declining. It could collapse at any moment, which the West feels is not in its interest today because it fears for the potential fate of Russia's nuclear arsenal. However, today's situation is reminiscent of the late Soviet era, when a year, or even just six months before its collapse, few in the West would have expected the imminent beginnings of such rapid, revolutionary, and turbulent political changes on "one-sixth of the Earth's land surface". Of course, back then, the danger of Soviet nuclear weapons proliferating was solved fairly quickly – in just three years<sup>28</sup>.

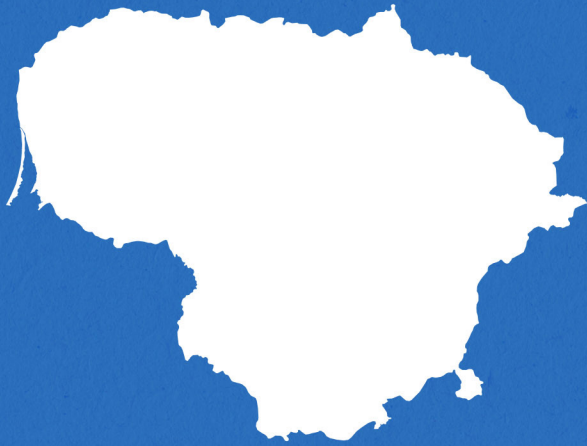
## CONCLUSION

According to the analysis shared above, it can be argued that Russia's aggressive international military and political activity, especially against Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries, as well as other manifestations of its domestic and foreign policy over at least the last seven-and-a-half years are clear evidence of how its behavior reflects the "new doctrine of limited sovereignty" – also known as the "Putin doctrine".

26 Ihor Lossovskiy, "Rosiya – 'derzhava-izgoy' [Russia Is a Rogue State]," Den', 7 April, 2015, <https://day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/svitovi-dyskusiyi/rosiya-derzhava-izgoy>.

27 "Volodin: Est' Putin – est' Rossiya, net Putina – net Rossii' [Volodin: 'If There Is Putin, There Is Russia; No Putin – No Russia']," MK.ru, October 23, 2014, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2014/10/23/volodin-est-putin-estrossiya-net-putina-net-rossii.html>.

28 Ihor Lossovskiy, Mizhnarodno-pravovy status Budapeshts'kogo Memorandumu [The International Legal Status of the Budapest Memorandum] (Kyiv: UAZP, 2015).



# COMPREHENSIVE IMPACT FOR INFORMATION INFLUENCE IN LITHUANIA

Vitold Jancis

A photograph of a cityscape is used as a background for the bottom half of the cover. On the right side, a prominent red and white church tower with a dark roof and spires is visible. To the left, there are modern buildings with glass facades and a large brick wall. The sky is overcast. The word 'MEDIA' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom center of the image.

MEDIA



## ABOUT AUTHOR Vitold Jančis

Vitold Jančis is a journalist at Ru.Delfi.lt specializing in society, countering fake news and propaganda; editor-in-chief of InBaltic.lt (2015-2020).

Lithuania has held a firm stance towards Russia's policies in the international arena. In response, Moscow has attempted to dramatically influence Lithuania's information space to suit its own interests.

The Kremlin's main tools of influence in attempting to transform Lithuania's information environment include not only media registered in the Russian Federation, but also a broad range of allegedly independent Russian outlets and experts, bloggers, and influencers who actively disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives on social media. In addition, pro-Russian narratives are repeated by media registered in Lithuania itself.

## THE KREMLIN'S ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

A typical example of Moscow's attempts to come up with its version of the events of the 20th century to impose on Lithuania is that of the Historical Memory Foundation, headed by historian Aleksandr Dyukov. The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has previously accused Dyukov of gross misrepresentation of history, disinformation and anti-Latvian propaganda. It noted that Dyukov had made earlier biased statements to the effect that there was no

occupation of the Baltic countries, and that Soviet deportations were legitimate, for example, when he argued that the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were necessary.<sup>1</sup>

In 2014, Lithuanian border guards detained Dyukov at the Vilnius airport, where he had arrived for the launch of his book, *On the Eve of the Holocaust*. According to Russian media reports, the book, which Dyukov intended to launch in Lithuania, contained documents from Lithuanian archives which allegedly testified to the involvement of the Lithuania's elite in laying the groundwork for exterminating Jews in that country.<sup>2</sup> Well-known Lithuanian historian (and Lithuania's current Defense Minister) Arvydas Anušauskas commented on Dyukov's detainment, stating: "Dyukov created the foundation for revising history, whitewashing Stalinism and the Soviet period. He is probably the only one who knows where the foundation gets its funding. In my opinion, intelligence services were definitely involved."<sup>3</sup>

Sergey Ivanov, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Russian Military Historical Society and Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Environmental Protection, Ecology and Transport, claimed in 2019 that, "the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, signed in August 1939, was an achievement of national

1 "MFA of Latvia: A Deceitful Historical Exhibition Takes Place in Russia," ru.DELFI.lv, February 3, 2012, <https://rus.delfi.lv/news/daily/latvia/mid-v-rossii-prohodit-lzhivaya-istoricheskaya-vystavka.d?id=42102568&all=true>.

2 "Russian historian Dyukov not allowed into Lithuania and returned to Moscow," ru.DELFI.lt, August 13, 2014, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/rossijskogo-istorika-dyukova-ne-vpustili-v-litvu-i-vernuli-moskve.d?id=65552678>.

3 Arvydas Anušauskas, "Historian: Dyukov wants to whitewash Soviet crimes through propaganda," ru.DELFI.lt, August 14, 2014, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/istorik-dyukov-hochet-propagandoj-obelit-sovetskie-prestupleniya.d?id=65560548>.

diplomacy to be proud of, of because this document ensured the protection of the USSR's national interests."<sup>4</sup> Aide to the President of the Russian Federation and Chairman of the Russian Military Historical Society Vladimir Medinsky (former Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation) noted the following in the spring of 2020 during the presentation of the collection of archival photographs entitled "Images of War": "There was a joint statement by the leadership of Baltic countries accusing ours of misrepresenting the history of World War II. Moreover, they say that two ruthless tyrants, Stalin and Hitler, divided Europe into spheres of influence, signed secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and effectively started World War II. Later, on the basis of this document, the Soviet Union allegedly annexed and occupied Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. We cannot leave such a statement unanswered".<sup>5</sup>

## PUTIN TRIES TO IMPOSE HIS VERSION

An excerpt from the original article penned by Russian President Vladimir Putin, "The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II," published in the American edition of *The National Interest*, is yet another example of the Kremlin's titanic efforts to impose its interpretation of Baltic history of the on the world at the highest level. Among other things in the article, Putin claims that Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia "joined" the USSR in 1940 after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with the consent of the Baltic countries' leadership. Their accession "was in line with both international and national laws at the time," he wrote. According to Putin, the Baltic states "retained their national authorities, language," and "were represented in the highest state structures of the Soviet Union."<sup>6</sup>

In reality, the non-aggression pact signed between the USSR and Germany in August 1939 included a secret protocol on the division of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, according to which Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and eastern Poland were included in the USSR's

sphere of influence. Lithuania was added to this list later. Just days after the agreement was signed, World War II began. In the summer of 1940, the Soviet Union sent large contingents of its troops into the Baltic countries, where it succeeded in displacing the governments of these countries and subsequently incorporated them into the USSR. In modern Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, these actions are considered an annexation, and the USSR is seen as guilty of starting the war alongside Germany.<sup>7</sup>

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SPEAKS AGAINST ATTEMPTS TO REWRITE HISTORY

Moscow's active attempts at influencing information at the regional and international levels provoked diplomatic opposition from both Lithuania and the European Union. On September 19, 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe, in which it condemned the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact by the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which "divid[ed] Europe and the territories of independent states between the two totalitarian regimes and group[ed] them into spheres of interest, which paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War."

MEPs expressed concern over the efforts of Russia's current leadership to whitewash the crimes committed by the Soviet totalitarian regime, and called them "a dangerous component of the information war waged against democratic Europe." They also condemned extremist and xenophobic political forces and organizations in Europe for the "distortion of historical facts, and employ[ing] symbolism and rhetoric that echo aspects of totalitarian propaganda, including racism, anti-Semitism, and hatred towards sexual and other minorities."<sup>8</sup>

In the summer of 2020, the Lithuanian Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the Russian State Duma's attempts at rewriting history and challenging the foundations of modern civilization and international law. An excerpt from the resolution can be found below:

4 Sergey Ivanov. "The Molotov Ribbentrop Pact was an achievement of diplomacy, said Ivanov," *RIA Novosti*, September 16, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190916/1558737633.html?in=t>.

5 "Medinsky said that Russia would not leave attempts to rewrite the history of war unanswered," *TASS*, May 7, 2020, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/8419841>.

6 Vladimir Putin, "The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II," *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982?page=0%2C5>.

7 "Baltic States Condemn Russia's Attempts to Rewrite History," *Radio Free Europe*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30679636.html>.

8 "Europe must remember its past to build its future," *European Parliament*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190917IPR61204/europe-must-remember-its-past-to-build-its-future>.

"The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania **strongly** condemns the moves by the State Duma of the Russian Federation and considers them as an attempt on the foundations of modern civilisation and international law, inter alia, the rule of law in international relations, prohibition of the use of force and threat thereof, sovereign equality of states, and respect for human rights; **stresses** that the systematic moves towards historical revisionism by the State Duma of the Russian Federation are intended to justify the current aggressive policy towards, and aggression against, its neighbours by the Russian Federation, to call into question the statehood of neighbouring countries on the basis of the concepts of 'the near abroad', 'the Russian world' and 'protection of compatriots', to promote distrust among the Western community, to divide the European Union and NATO, and to engage in confrontation with the West for the coming decades."<sup>9</sup>

## RUSSIA'S FOREIGN MINISTRY ACCUSES THE EU OF FALSIFYING HISTORY

Moscow had a strong response to the European Parliament resolution, and the official representative of Russia's Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova described it as "yet another wave of a gross falsification of history. This resolution is nothing more than a collection of revisionist statements. The European Parliament was involved in yet another outrageous attempt to equate Nazi Germany, the aggressor country, and the USSR, whose nations paid the highest cost to liberate Europe from fascism." According to Russia's MFA, "the statement by MEPs about World War II breaking out because of the Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the USSR on August 23, 1939, has nothing to do with history, either."<sup>10</sup>

Official statements by the Russian Federation's highest-ranking officials are not merely a matter of opinion among politicians representing a large, influential country infamous for its disdain towards the integrity of its neighbors' borders (some examples from recent history include the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), but rather an attempt to

impose its version of events on the entire world as the only true narrative. This, in turn, requires the efforts of both the Russian media and media outlets that receive funding from sources associated with Moscow.

After Putin's article in *The National Interest*, Russian media published a number of materials accusing Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia of trying to rewrite history. Here is just one example of an aggressive publication in the Russian media: "In the Baltic States, there are increasingly active attempts to cause a scandal through the arbitrary interpretation of events that took place at various instances during World War II, turning inconvenient facts around, and shifting the responsibility for catastrophic destruction and the deaths of tens of millions. The region is facing economic difficulties, young people are heading to the West in search of a better life, factories are closed, freight traffic has decreased, and the main sectors of the economy have either died or are going through hard times. To distract the population from this, high-profile campaigns are being launched to create an image of the enemy and to point fingers. Statements about 'occupation' and accusing neighboring countries of 'inciting World War II' are perfectly in line with this idea."<sup>11</sup>

## "A DIFFERENT REALITY" IN RUSSIAN MEDIA

EUvsDisinfo, a project of the East StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Service, noted that "pro-Kremlin outlets alleged that 'American fascists' and 'local collaborators' used the events of January 13, 1991<sup>12</sup> to destroy the USSR. Such claims seek to revise not only Lithuanian but also Russian history, ignoring the fact that thousands of Muscovites took to the streets in January 1991 to support Lithuanian independence."<sup>13</sup> According to pro-Kremlin media, the independence of the Baltic states is nothing more than a historical inconvenience and the result of an American "conspiracy." We have already seen claims that the Baltic countries receive instructions from the US State Department on how to respond to international events, that the US is pushing Lithuania to buy American gas, and that Lithuania, which is

9 "Resolution on attempts of the Russian State Duma to rewrite history and challenge the foundations of modern civilization and international law," *Seimas of Lithuania*, June 18, 2020, <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/6d844660b16511ea9a12d0dada3ca61b2?fwid=i3h7wenag>.

10 "Moscow criticizes the European Parliament over 'Anti-Soviet' Resolution," *Interfax*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/677307>.

11 Maksim Mayrov, "Historical revisionism: why the Baltics rewrite history," *Rubaltic.ru*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/14062020-istoricheskiy-revizionizm-pochemu-v-pribaltike-perepisyvayut-istoriyu/>.

12 On January 13, 1991, thirteen Lithuanian civilians were killed when the Soviet special forces stormed a television tower in Vilnius.

13 "30 Years of 'Colour Revolutions,'" *EUvsDisinfo*, January 14, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ru/30-%d0%bb%d0%b5%d1%82-%d1%86%d0%b2%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%bd%d1%8b%d1%85-%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b2%d0%be%d0%bb%d1%8e%d1%86%d0%b8%d0%b9/>.

allegedly the culprit behind growing tensions with Russia, is not even an independent country!<sup>14</sup>

Several main narratives can be seen in almost all Russian media publications (apart from the few liberal media outlets remaining in Russia):

- 1) Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are rewriting history, not Russia;
- 2) the economies of all three Baltic countries are in a deplorable state;
- 3) young people from the Baltic states are leaving for the West;
- 4) political parties are looking for an outside enemy to distract people from their poor quality of life, and Russia fills this role;
- 5) Lithuania is not an independent state and receives orders from the United States.

In addition to Russia's large national media sector, Lithuania is also a major source of interest for niche news agencies, such as RU.BALTIC.RU, SPUTNIK.lt, IA Regnum, BALTNEWS.lt, and others which position themselves as outlets that write "the truth" that Lithuanian authorities are allegedly attempting to conceal. Information that appears on the pages of those outlets is often not only far from truth but also meant to convince the readers that life in Lithuania is far worse than in the Russian Federation, that the economy is in a deplorable state, and the country itself is hostile towards a peaceful Russia.<sup>15</sup> The Lithuanian State Security Department regularly publishes reviews investigating threats to the state. In its 2019 and 2020 reviews, RU.BALTIC.RU<sup>16</sup> appears as one of the tools used to disseminate pro-Russian narratives and influence. In June 2018, BuzzFeed (USA), 15min (Lithuania), Re:Baltica (Latvia), and Postimees (Estonia) conducted an investigation which revealed that BALTNEWS news agency, which had positioned itself as an independent media outlet in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, was actually receiving funding directly from Russia's RIA Novosti news agency, along with direct instructions on what to cover and how. The three regional versions of BALTNEWS were launched in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

at the same time, and all of them used identical working methods—all three websites are indistinguishable from one another in design, appeared at the same time, and published similar articles each day. Aleksandr Kornilov, the head of BALTNEWS in the Baltic countries, received direct instructions, including a list of topics to cover, from an employee of Rossiya Segodnya, a state-owned media holding that includes Sputnik and RIA Novosti news agencies and is linked to RT.<sup>17</sup> In the 2014 and 2015, reports from the Lithuanian Department of State Security also mentioned the outlets *Obzor*, *Express Nyedyelya*, and *Litovskiy Kurier*, which are familiar to most Russian speakers in Lithuania, as channels carrying out "soft influence" on the country's Russian-speaking population.

## THE FIGHT FOR TV VIEWERS

Despite the confrontation in the diplomatic sphere, Lithuanian commercial television channels have consistently increased the presence of Russian television content on the air since 2007. While television shows produced in Russia made up 79 hours a week on Lithuanian television in 2007, their total volume grew to 198 hours per week in 2017, and 212 in 2019. Russian television products were purchased and broadcast mainly by commercial television stations, including BTV, TV1, TV6, TV8, and Lietuvos Rytas TV.<sup>18</sup>

Commercial television station managers explained their position by the fact that television content from Russia is relatively cheap and of high quality. In July 2019, amendments to the Law on Public Information came into effect, which stipulate that only television products that are broadcast in non-official EU languages for up to one-and-a-half hours a day may be broadcast with subtitles. Television programs with a duration exceeding that limit must be dubbed.<sup>19</sup>

According to Lithuanian media, the total amount of Russian-language content broadcast on Lithuanian TV began dropping regularly, reaching 125 hours a

14 "30 Years of 'Colour Revolutions'."

15 "How Lithuanian transport was run over," *Baltnews*, January 9, 2021, [https://baltnews.lt/ekonomika\\_online\\_novosti/20210109/1020497997/Stradanie-perevozhchika-Kak-litovskiy-transport-popal-pod-kolesa-dushegubki.html](https://baltnews.lt/ekonomika_online_novosti/20210109/1020497997/Stradanie-perevozhchika-Kak-litovskiy-transport-popal-pod-kolesa-dushegubki.html).

16 Lietuvos Respublikos valstybės saugumo departamentas ir Antrasis operatyvinių tarnybų departamentas prie Krašto apsaugos ministerijos, *Bendras VSD ir AOTD grėsmių nacionaliniam saugumui vertinimas 2019* (Vilnius: 2019), pp. 43-48; *Bendras VSD ir AOTD grėsmių nacionaliniam saugumui vertinimas 2020* (Vilnius: 2020), pp. 40-48.

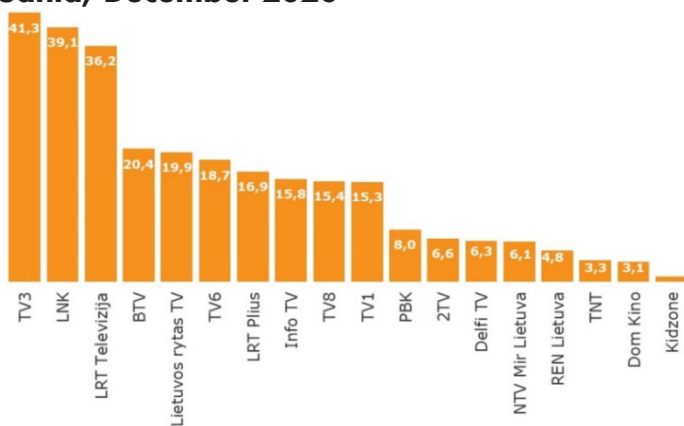
17 "Kremliaus propagandos aparato viduje: prorusiškiems portalams Baltijos šalyse – dideli pinigai ir instrukcijos iš Maskvos," *15min.lt*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/kremliaus-propagandos-aparato-viduje-nutekeje-duomenys-atskleidzia-milijonus-euru-ir-instrukcijas-propagandistams-56-1019424?copied>.

18 Vitold Jancis, "Stop 'Soft Annexation' of the TV: How Lithuania Wants to Fight against Russian TV Propaganda," *Deutsche Welle*, August 8, 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3Cvaa>.

19 Jancis, "Stop 'Soft Annexation' of the TV."

week by the beginning of 2020.<sup>20</sup> Although the number of television shows, series and films produced in Russia has decreased on Lithuanian commercial channels, Moscow’s information influence remains—largely due to Russian television channels being included in cable television packages and the availability of shows online. According to surveys conducted by the Kantar polling company, in December 2020, Lithuanian viewers were still watching Russian television channels, such as First Baltic Channel (8.0%), NTV World — Lithuania (6.1%), and REN Lietuva (4.8%).<sup>21</sup> The sample included 1200 respondents from 550 households.

### Average Daily Reach of TV Channels in Lithuania, December 2020



**Source:** TV auditorijos tyrimo rezultatai, KANTAR, 12.20.2020, <http://www.kantar.lt/lt/news/tv-auditorijos-tyrimo-rezultatai-2020-m-gruodis/>

## BLOCKING TV CHANNELS

One way to fight against Russia’s information influence was by blocking Russian television channels from broadcasting in Lithuanian territory. For example, in early July 2020, the Lithuanian Radio and Television Commission (LRTVC) banned Russia Today in Lithuania due to its ties to Russian propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov, who is on the EU’s blacklist.<sup>22</sup> In 2019, LRTVC resorted to blocking the portal of Russia’s state news agency Sputnik due to copyright violations.<sup>23</sup> Russia’s RTR Planet was suspended from broadcasting in Lithuanian territory in 2015, 2016, and 2018<sup>24</sup> (several countries, including the Baltics, were threatened with occupation and military reprisals on air; the shows attempted to incite polarization and national hatred). In the fall of 2020, LRTVC began preparations for suspending RTR-Planeta<sup>25</sup> yet again, over calls by odious Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy to “fire up the missiles” and “shut [the Baltic countries’] mouths”. LRTVC also monitors the impact and viewership of Lithuanian-language portals that disseminate pro-Russian narratives. According to the user statistics on these portals, the number of unique visitors to [sputniknews.lt](http://sputniknews.lt) is 49,407. [3min.lt](http://3min.lt) receives under 5,000 unique visitors; [20min.lt](http://20min.lt) — under 5,000; [ldiena.lt](http://ldiena.lt) — under 5,000; [sarmatas.lt](http://sarmatas.lt) — 13,281; and [laisvaslaikrastis.lt](http://laisvaslaikrastis.lt) — 17,262.<sup>26</sup>

20 Aušra Lėka, “Mūsų TV ekranai vaduojasi nuo Rusijos,” *Diena.lt*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/musu-tv-ekranai-vaduojasi-nuo-rusijos-950091>.

21 “TV auditorijos tyrimo rezultatai 2020 m. gruodis,” KANTAR, December 20, 2020, <http://www.kantar.lt/lt/news/tv-auditorijos-tyrimo-rezultatai-2020-m-gruodis/>.

22 “Lithuania Bans Broadcasting RT” [in Russian], ru.Delfi.lt, July 8, 2020, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/litva-zapretila-translyaciyu-telekanala-rt.d?id=84716359>.

23 “LRTVC to Resume Access to Lithuanian Portal of Sputnik Agency” [in Russian], ru.DELFI.lt, July 29, 2019, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/lkrtv-vozobnovit-dostup-k-litovskomu-portalu-agentstva-sputnik.d?id=81853453>.

24 “European Commission: Broadcasting of RTR Planeta in Lithuania Suspended Legally” [in Russian], LRT.lt, May 9, 2018, <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/211929/evrokommisiia-transliatsii-rtr-planeta-v-litve-ostanovleny-zakonno>.

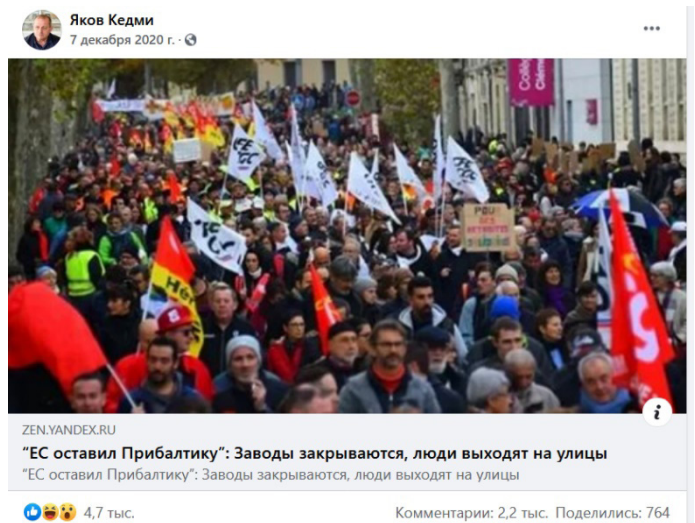
25 Suspension Procedure for RTR Planeta Initiated in Lithuania [in Russian], ru.DELFI.lt, October 29, 2020, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/v-litve-nachata-procedura-priostanovki-retranslyacii-rtk-planety.d?id=85604397>.

26 “Propaganda Websites Not Popular in Lithuania” [in Lithuanian], *Lietuvos radijo ir televizijos komisija*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.rtk.lt/lt/naujienos/propagandines-internetu-svetaines-lietuvoje-nepopuliaros>.

# TROLLS, BOTS, AND BLOGGERS WORKING AS KREMLIN TOOLS

While Lithuanian public organizations regulating TV, radio, and online broadcasting are more or less successful at containing the Russian media's impact, the task of controlling the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives on social media or fighting them with counter-narratives appears much more complex. So-called "elves" try to counteract propaganda on social media disseminated by online trolls and people who are generally disgruntled with society.<sup>27</sup> Lithuanian "elves" include a group of volunteers and journalists founded by famous Lithuanian blogger Ričardas Savukynas.<sup>28</sup>

Some more examples of Russia's classic "soft influence" via social media Western countries in general beyond Lithuania include the activity of information websites that have merged into a single network through expert profiles on social media, including such persons as Yakov Kedmi and Yevgeny Satanovsky. According to CrowdTangle, from 2017 to January 25, 2021, materials posted on Jacob Kedmi's Facebook page alone (Kedmi has pages on four or five social networks) received 4.84 million user reactions and were shared 734,000. A typical post on Kedmi's page argues that things are bad in the Baltics or the EU.<sup>29</sup> Strong criticism of policy, achievements, and life in the Baltic countries can be found on the page of another Russian expert, Yevgeny Satanovsky.<sup>30</sup>



**Source:** Yakov Kedmi's Facebook page. Facebook Screenshot, December 7, 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/jakovkedmi/posts/1426777124195002>



**Source:** Yevgeny Satanovsky's Facebook page. Facebook Screenshot, January 22, 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/evgeniysatanovskiy/posts/1071811660007691>

CrowdTangle data indicate that materials published on Satanovsky's Facebook page between 2017 and January 25, 2021 received 1.54 million reactions from Facebook users and were shared almost 164,000 times. Satanovsky's and Kedmi's accounts are also quite popular on Instagram, Twitter and Telegram. It is also worth noting that each of these experts have several accounts

27 Kim Sengupta. "Meet the Elves, Lithuania's digital citizen army confronting Russian trolls", *Independent*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/lithuania-elves-russia-election-tampering-online-cyber-crime-hackers-kremlin-a9008931.html>.

28 Álex Barredo. "Elfos' de la OTAN para acabar con los 'trolls' rusos en Internet," *La Vanguardia*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/221533/el-fy-nato-kotorye-pokonchat-s-russkimi-trolliami-v-internete>.

29 Yakov Kedmi's Facebook page. Facebook Screenshot, December 7, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/jakovkedmi/posts/1426777124195002>.

30 Yevgeny Satanovsky's Facebook page. Facebook Screenshot, January 22, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/evgeniysatanovskiy/posts/1071811660007691>.



on all the social networks mentioned above, which include almost identical content. Notably, the websites hosting propaganda materials that Satanovsky and Kedmi refer to do not have media registration numbers, while Kedmi and Satanovsky's accounts themselves do not have a blue badge confirming their identity on Facebook. It was also found that almost all of the accounts for Yakob Kedmi, Yevgeny Satanovsky, and other experts are managed by one or two people from Belarusian territory.<sup>31</sup> The identity of one system administrator was successfully established—he is a citizen of Belarus, the director of a company that sells agricultural machinery, and notably, he also owns a second company with the exact same name registered in the Russian Federation, though the companies in Russia and Belarus each have different websites. Selling agricultural machinery to Russia, Belarus, and EU countries allows this man to move freely throughout each country.

The scale of these activities, the number of sites that masquerade as real information portals, the number of expert accounts on all social networks, including Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram, and the frequency and variety of publications point toward these efforts being managed by a serious organization or a well-organized group. The goals it pursues are directly tied to expanding and strengthening Russia's influence among Lithuania's Russian speaking population and Western countries in general.

## CYBERATTACKS

Lithuanian news portal and public institution websites are regularly targeted by hackers. Although it is quite difficult to identify the instigators and perpetrators of cyberattacks, the materials that the cybercriminals are trying to disseminate are aimed at discrediting either NATO (in favor of Russia) or Western government officials.

On February 14, 2017, then-Speaker of the Lithuanian Seimas Viktoras Pranckietis, several Lithuanian MPs, Lithuanian police, and a number of media outlets received an email from someone identified only by a pseudonym. The author of the anonymous letter reported

that on February 10, German servicemen who had just arrived in Lithuania as part of the NATO international battalion, had raped a minor. The letter provided a number of details that made this story appear believable at first glance. The story was reminiscent of a similar case involving "a girl named Liza," when, in January 2016, Russian media started a propaganda campaign amid the migration crisis about a 13-year-old girl from a Russian family living in Berlin who was allegedly raped by a refugee.<sup>32</sup> In January 2018, hackers broke into the portal of the Lithuanian commercial television station TV3 and posted that the Lithuanian Minister of Defense had molested a radio station journalist and confessed to being gay. The IP address showed that the website was hacked from a computer located in St. Petersburg.<sup>33</sup>

In early December of last year, unknown individuals carried out a comprehensive attack on the websites of several Lithuanian state institutions—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and the State Border Guard Service of Lithuania. The hacks were followed by publications about the alleged detention of a Polish diplomat who was purported to be transporting weapons and drugs, as well as instructions to conscripts to appear at regional conscription offices. Earlier, in September 2020, during a cyberattack on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, false information was posted indicating the then-Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius had allegedly called for sending "peacekeeping forces" to Belarus.<sup>34</sup> After the Polish news website Poland Daily was hacked, a false article was posted there, claiming that at a closed doors meeting, the Polish and Lithuanian Ministers of Foreign Affairs had allegedly also suggested sending peacekeeping forces into Belarus. A little later, this false information appeared on LiveLeak, and a fake letter was sent to *The New Yorker* from the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry, allegedly confirming the conversation between Polish and Lithuanian ministers. The representatives of Lithuania's MoD commented responded with the following comment: "dissemination of this information targeted society itself and was meant to stimulate citizens' distrust in the NATO membership and the Alliance itself, as well as the public authorities of Lithuania, and to reduce the

31 "How Does the Propagandist Network of Portals and Experts Targeting Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia Work? Tracing the Story Back to Belarus and Russia," [in Russian] Ru.DELFI.lt, December 24, 2020, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/kak-rabotaet-propagandistskaya-set-portalov-i-ekspertov-nacelennyh-na-litvu-latviyu-i-estoniyu-sledy-vedut-v-belarus-i-rossiyu.d?id=86030611>.

32 Vitold Jancis, Nikita Zholkver. "How Vilnius and Berlin Exposed the Fake about the Bundeswehr in Lithuania," *Deutsche Welle*, February 17, 2017, <https://p.dw.com/p/2Xlwy>.

33 Vaidotas Beniušis, "Hacker Attack: Lithuanian Portal Hacked, Minister of Defense of Lithuania Slandered," ru.DELFI.lt, January 18, 2018, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/news/live/hakerskaya-ataka-vzломali-litovskij-portal-i-oklevetali-ministra-oborony-litvy.d?id=76940887>.

34 "Attack by Fake. Lithuanian Authorities under Hacker Attack," [in Russian] LRT.lt, December 10, 2020, <https://www.lrt.lt/ru/novosti/17/1295881/ataka-feikom-vedomstva-litvy-podverglis-khakerskoi-atake>.

population's loyalty to their country."<sup>35</sup> These cyberattacks on Lithuanian public institutions perpetrated by unknown individuals continued to promote the position of Russian and pro-Russian media.

It is likely that attempts to spread disinformation on behalf of fictitious people, hack Lithuanian media sites, and create and distribute content through Kedmi and Satanovsky's social media accounts are part of the operation revealed by cybersecurity experts from the American firm Mandiant. Experts called this "Operation Ghostwriter," because almost all of the individuals who disseminated sensational information in order to undermine the confidence of the people of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland in NATO turned out to be non-existent, as though they were ghosts.<sup>36</sup>

Mandiant assumes there is a link between several information operations, which we believe may form part of a broader campaign of influence launched prior to March 2017 and aligned with Russia's interests. "The operations have primarily targeted audiences in Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland with anti-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) narratives, often leveraging website compromises or spoofed email accounts to disseminate fabricated content, including falsified correspondence from military officials. This falsified content has been referenced as source material in articles and op-eds authored by at least 14 inauthentic personas posing as locals, journalists, and analysts within those countries,"<sup>37</sup> say US experts in their report. It is also noteworthy that, for instance, Kedmi's profile, as noted earlier, appeared on Facebook in 2017, right when the influence operation on Baltic States and Poland began, according to Mandiant experts.

Based on a number of events happening in the Lithuanian and Polish information spaces, we can deduce that Operation Ghostwriter is still going strong. First, Russian pranksters Lexus and Vovan tricked the Chairman of the Lithuanian Seimas Committee on Foreign Affairs Žygimantas Pavilionis by impersonating Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny's ally Leonid Volkov, which led to a small scandal and a local political crisis.<sup>38</sup> In April 2021, un-

identified individuals hacked the website of a small information portal in Lithuania and posted a fake message with a video stating that Lithuanians, in solidarity with the Belarusian opposition activist Pavel Latushka, should organize Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's inauguration ceremony. This time, the attackers used a new tactic: they asked readers to donate money for the alleged inauguration ceremony, and then published bank account details in an attempt to portray Belarusian activists as financial fraudsters. These bank accounts actually belonged to the Blessed Priest Mykolas Sopocka's Hospice, a well-known Polish charity in Vilnius. The hospice denied any involvement in this information campaign.<sup>39</sup>

It is evident that the organizers of Operation Ghostwriter are trying to actively influence pain points in Lithuanian society, such as the national issue, attitudes towards migrants, and interaction between Poles, Russians, and Lithuanians, etc. When unknown attackers gained access to the personal e-mail belonging to Michał Dworczyk, Chief of the Chancellery of Poland, they published, among other things, correspondence between Dworczyk and Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki on Telegram, in which Dworczyk frankly discusses Polish-Lithuanian relations, noting that "the golden period of Polish-Lithuanian relations is over."<sup>40</sup>

## "CULTURAL" INFLUENCE

The Russian information influence testing Lithuania's strength is most active in the field of culture. The Russian entertainment industry and Russian culture have long been present in Lithuania. However, official Vilnius regularly updates the lists of Russian entertainers who are especially active in supporting the regime of Vladimir Putin, and prohibits them from entering the country.

For example, in 2016, Lithuania put Russian singer Oleg Gazmanov on the non-grata list due to his support of the Kremlin's policy, and statements justifying the Russian aggression in neighboring countries. In December 2013, the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry claimed that Gazmanov,

35 "Attack by Fake."

36 "'Ghostwriter' Influence Campaign: Unknown Actors Leverage Website Compromises and Fabricated Content to Push Narratives Aligned with Russian Security Interests," *FireEye*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/blog/pdfs/Ghostwriter-Influence-Campaign.pdf>.

37 "'Ghostwriter' Influence Campaign."

38 "Opposition Figure Impersonating Russians Release Video of Prank Call to Lithuanian MP," *DELFI.lt*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/opposition-figure-impersonating-russians-release-video-of-prank-call-to-lithuanian-mp.d?id=87421893>.

39 Vaidas Saldžiūnas, Nerijus Maliukevičius, Lukas Andriukaitis, "Info attack targeting Lithuania bears hallmarks of Operation Ghostwriter," *DFRLab*, June 15, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/info-attack-targeting-lithuania-bears-hallmarks-of-operation-ghostwriter-2e2273d09c47>.

40 "Kulisy wyjazdu Dworczyka na Litwę. 'Złoty okres relacji polsko-litewskich się skończył.'" *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 18, 2020, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,27219926,kulisy-wyjazdu-dworczyka-na-litwe-zloty-okres-relacji-polsko-litewskich.html>.

who sang a song in Vilnius glorifying the Soviet Union, had incited hostility and showed disrespect for the history of Lithuania. Gazmanov then sang the song *Made in the USSR* with the following lyrics: "Ukraine and Crimea, Belarus and Moldova, this is my country. Sakhalin and Kamchatka, the Ural Mountains, this is my country. Krasnoyarsk Krai, Siberia and the Volga Region, Kazakhstan and the Caucasus, and the Baltics too ... I was born in the Soviet Union, I was made in the USSR!"<sup>41</sup> In 2015, Lithuania canceled the concert of the Russian Army's A.V. Aleksandrov Song and Dance Ensemble, citing the "ideological component" and "Soviet legacy."<sup>42</sup> Grigory Leps was not allowed to enter Lithuania, either—the authorities imposed sanctions against him under the Magnitsky Act, which allows countries to blacklist persons associated with corruption, money laundering, or human rights violations. The US imposed sanctions on Leps in 2013; according to the US Treasury, Leps had transferred money on behalf of Vladislav Leontiev, a leader of the Eurasian criminal group Bratskiy Krug (*Bratva*).<sup>43</sup>

In early 2021, Russian celebrity Philipp Kirkorov was also denied entry to Lithuania. "Artists who publicly justify the occupation of Crimea cannot be tolerated under any democracy. We have a clear stance on such individuals, which is why there was no doubt about putting Philipp Kirkorov on the list of personas non grata in Lithuania," commented Lithuanian Minister of the Interior Agnė Bilotaitė.<sup>44</sup> Lithuanian authorities are also considering banning legendary Russian singer Mikhail Shufutinsky from entry. Although bans are a fairly effective means of limiting pro-Putin Russian pop artists from touring in Lithuania, they have no effect on the performers' popularity among Lithuanian citizens.

## CONCLUSION

In the near future, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are all likely to face a new wave of Putin-incited information warfare with Russia. According to the German news agency Deutsche Welle, earlier this year, the Russian President recommended that the State Duma prepare a bill banning publicly equating of the roles of the USSR and Nazi Germany in World War II and consider it during the spring session.<sup>45</sup> Note that in October 2020, at a meeting of the Council for Culture and Arts, the matter of toughening laws against anyone who equated the actions of the USSR and Nazi Germany had already been raised. Head of the State Duma Committee on Culture Elena Yampolskaya then formally proposed the measure. In May of 2020, Duma member Aleksey Zhuravlyov proposed prohibiting equating Soviet ideology with German nationalism.<sup>46</sup>

The Duma complied with the instructions on June 9, 2021, passing the relevant law in its third reading. "It is prohibited to equate the goals, decisions, and actions of the leadership, commanders, and military of the USSR with goals, decisions, and actions of the leadership, commanders, and military of the Nazi Germany and the "Axis" countries on the Internet and in the media, as well as to deny the crucial role of the Soviet people in the defeat of the Nazi Germany and the humanitarian mission of the USSR in the liberation of European countries,"<sup>47</sup> and the law "On the Commemoration of the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945" was then amended.<sup>48</sup>

Based on this decision of Vladimir Putin, and the fact that it was secured at the legislative level by the State Duma, brings us to the conclusion that the Kremlin is ready to start stepping up its propaganda and information influence efforts to create an alternative historical reality.

41 "Lithuanian Authorities Deny Entry to Singer Gazmanov due to Support of Kremlin's Policies," [in Russian] BBC, August 18, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-37117198>.

42 "Concert of Aleksandrov Choir Cancelled in Lithuania for Ideological Reasons," [in Russian] Polskie Radio dla Zagranicy, October 23, 2015, <http://archiwum.radiopolsha.pl/6/137/Artykul/226049>.

43 "Russian Singer Grigory Leps Denied Entry into Lithuania," [in Russian] Current Time, ru.Delfi.lt, May 3, 2019, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/leps-litva-evropa-zapret-russia-singer/29919206.html>.

44 "Philipp Kirkorov Put on Undesirable List," [in Lithuanian] 15min.lt, January 19, 2021, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/kirkorovas-itrauktas-i-nepageidajamu-asmenu-sarasa-56-1442102>.

45 Olga Demidova, "Putin Wants to Prohibit Equating the USSR to Germany in World War II," *Deutsche Welle*, January 25, 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3oOkC>.

46 "State Duma Files Draft on Liability for Distorting the History of World War II," *RIA Novosti*, May 27, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200527/1572058146.html>.

47 "It is forbidden to publicly equate the roles of the USSR and Nazi Germany," *State Duma of the Russian Federation*, June 9, 2021, <http://duma.gov.ru/news/51742/>.

48 "State Duma Prohibits Equating the USSR to Nazi Germany," *Rubaltic.ru*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/09062021-gosduma-zapretila-otozhdestvlyat-sssr-s-natsistskoy-germaniey/>.

It is worth noting that the Kremlin is no longer simply attempting to influence Lithuania's information agenda; it also applies comprehensive impact (through culture, social media, and propaganda in Russian media broadcast on cable TV or online) to deflect any of Vilnius's countermeasures. The Lithuanian Radio and Television Commission actively opposes attempts to spread Moscow's influence over Lithuanian Russian-speaking TV viewers and blocks Russian TV channels from being broadcast in the country. Therefore, Internet portals and expert pages on social networks have become Russian political strategists' "master key" to "hacking" the Lithuanian information. Whether or not Lithuania manages to find an effective antidote to the malign influence inflicted by Russia and developed through the accounts of experts like Kedmi or Satanovsky and a broad network of trolls, bots, "useful idiots" and people disgruntled with Lithuanian politics, remains to be seen.



# THE NORWEGIAN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA SPHERE AND RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

John Færseth

MEDIA





## ABOUT AUTHOR

### John Færseth

John Færseth is a Norwegian author and freelance journalist. He published books on conspiracy theories in Norway and the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. His most recent book is *The Lighthouse in the East: Putin's Russia and Western Extremists* (2021).

## BACKGROUND

Norway is a country with a low level of political polarization not only in Scandinavia but also in Europe. Due to its role as an oil and gas exporter, Norway is not dependent on Russian energy, and as Europe's second largest producer it even represents an alternative to Russian gas for other European countries. The wealth brought by decades of oil and gas production and export has also softened the impact of economic crises and made Norway more financially independent than many countries.

Norway is a founding member of NATO, and the majority of the population have supported its membership since the late 1940s. In a 2019 poll, 80 percent of respondents agreed that membership contributes to the security of the country.<sup>1</sup> This was a 4 percent increase since 2016.<sup>2</sup> Also relevant, in a 2017 poll on behalf of the newspaper *Dagbladet*, 58 percent of respondents considered Russian President Vladimir Putin "a threat to world peace."<sup>3</sup> In another poll from 2019, 67 percent agreed with this statement.<sup>4</sup>

Support for NATO is also dominant in most political parties with the exception of the two minor leftist parties: Socialist Left Party (Sosialistisk Venstreparti, hereafter re-

ferred to by its common shorthand SV) and Red (Rødt). While the SV has shifted somewhat, Rødt is still a staunch opponent of NATO and believes Norway should instead be able to defend itself. Much of the opposition in the latter years has focused on NATO's "out of area" operations, which many party members view as imperialist or as contributing to destabilization.

Both parties have been leading critics of the bombing of Libya, where Norway took part, and of potential operations in Syria. Rødt is also opposed to US or other allied forces in Norway and the Baltic states, which it sees as potentially escalating conflict with Russia. Rødt has also warned that US forces on Norwegian soil can make it a target for a Russian attack. This is consistent with the party's general stance on foreign affairs and defense and should not be interpreted as signs that the party is in an agent of Russian influence.

Support for Norwegian membership in NATO does not follow party lines. According to the 2019 poll mentioned above, even among those voting for the party most skeptical of NATO—Rødt—49 percent agreed that NATO membership contributes to the security of the country. A similar percentage of voters for the SV—the party that is second most critical of NATO—was 62 per-

1 "Meningsmålinger om Forsvaret og internasjonalt samarbeid," Folk og Forsvar (website), August 2019.

2 "Meningsmålinger om Forsvaret og internasjonalt samarbeid," Folk og Forsvar (website), August 2016, [http://www.folkogforsvar.no/resources/meningsmalinger/Meningsmalinger-om-Forsvaret-og-internasjonalt-samarbeid\\_-august-2016.pdf](http://www.folkogforsvar.no/resources/meningsmalinger/Meningsmalinger-om-Forsvaret-og-internasjonalt-samarbeid_-august-2016.pdf).

3 Jesper Nordahl Finsveen, "Nordmenn: Putins Russland er en trussel for verdensfreden," *Dagbladet*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/halve-norge-mener-putin-er-en-trussel-mot-verdensfreden/69997750>.

4 "Det verste fra to verdener." *Dagbladet*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/det-verste-fra-to-verdener/71386920>.

cent.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, this was an increase since 2016. Similarly, there were small percentages of voter in other parties who agreed that NATO membership increases the danger of conflict escalation, or that it makes little difference.

There is, however, a significant disagreement between SV and Rødt voters and the voters of other parties regarding whether Norway should participate in NATO military missions sanctioned by the UN. Only 57 percent and 55 percent of voters of these parties agreed wholly or partially to this in 2019, while the percentages for other parties ranged between 70–90 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Norway has twice voted against joining the EU (previously the European Economic Community/EEC), first in 1972 and again in 1994. Since 1994, Norway has been a member of the European Economic Area (EEA). Norway differs from many other European countries in that Euroskepticism (defined as skepticism toward the EU, not to the continent as such) has historically come more from the left, mainly from the SV and Rødt, than from the right. The exception is the centrist, agrarian Center Party (Senterpartiet), which in 1994 was an important voice in the fight against Norwegian membership and still wants to take Norway out of the EEA,<sup>7</sup> and the rightist Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FrP), which wants to remain in the EEA but stay out of the EU. Its program specifies that Norway should not become part of a common European asylum and immigration policy.<sup>8</sup> The center-left Labour Party (Arbeiderpartiet) has historically been far more positive toward the EU and was in a government during both attempts to take Norway into the union.

## GEOGRAPHY AND POTENTIAL FAULT LINES

Geographically, Norway is the only Western European country to share a border with Russia, albeit a short one, in the far northeastern Sør-Varanger area in Troms and Finnmark (formerly Finnmark) county. Local relations across the border have traditionally been good and cordial. Many northern Norwegians also have fond memories of how the Soviet Red Army liberated the area in the later days of World War II. These memories form part of local popular history and still influence the local view of

Russia and Russians, even among people who were born several decades later.

The Cold War era, when the border was essentially sealed, is seen today as a historical anomaly. And since the early 1990s, there have been deliberate attempts from both sides to re-create the ties that existed in pre-Soviet times. Up until the outbreak of COVID-19, borders have been open for locals on both sides, with much cross-border trade and economic cooperation taking place on an individual level (Russian families often drive over to Norway to buy diapers or cheese while Norwegians drive to Russia to buy gasoline), and more broadly through the shipyard industry and cultural cooperation. Sør-Varanger borders directly on the heavily militarized Kola Peninsula where Russia's Northern Fleet is located, which is also Russia's only outlet to the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Both in 2016 and 2019, Northern Norway scored slightly lower than the national average on the question of whether NATO membership contributed to the security of the country. The difference was, however, not more than 3 percent and 5 percent, respectively. There was also a 2 percent increase from 2016 to 2019.

The Spitsbergen (Norwegian: Svalbard) archipelago is a part of the Kingdom of Norway. However, the Svalbard Treaty of 1920 guarantees equal economic rights to all signatory powers, including Russia, which maintains the mining settlement Barentsburg. There is also talk of reopening the Pyramiden settlement. To this day, coal mining continues in both Norway and Russia, although Norway is in the process of replacing it with tourism and scientific research.

Due to Svalbard's complicated status, Russia's sanctioned Dmitry Rogozin, who was then Deputy Prime Minister, caused considerable reactions in Norway when he appeared unannounced at Svalbard airport in Longyearbyen before going on to visit Barentsburg, making sure to post about the trip on social media. Similarly, Norwegian reactions were seized upon by Russian media, which questioned Norway's sovereignty over the archipelago, while the hashtag #spitsbergenisours (and in Russian, #шпицбергеннаш) was used on social media. Some have interpreted this as a coordinated campaign combining public diplomacy, social media, and boots on the ground to undermine Norwegian perceptions of

5 "Meningsmålinger om Forsvaret," Folk og Forsvar, August 2019.

6 "Meningsmålinger om Forsvaret," Folk og Forsvar, August 2019.

7 "Nei til EU," Senterpartiet (website), March 3, 2021, <https://www.senterpartiet.no/politikk/hjertesaker/nei-til-eu>

8 "Norge og Europa," Fremskrittspartiet 2021–2025, (website), <https://www.frp.no/var-politikk/utenriks-og-forsvar/eu-og-eos>.

Svalbard's status.<sup>9</sup>

## POTENTIAL POLITICAL FAULT LINES

Norway's relatively low level of political polarization means that the following "fault lines" that could potentially be exploited by disinformation, should be viewed as possibilities and not as risks at the present time, although this could change in the future. The "fault lines" include immigration, relations with NATO, and—more important—the EU and EEA, as well as questions of center vs periphery, particularly regarding north-south divisions.

Like most European and Western countries, Norway is divided regarding immigration. The anti-immigration FrP has at times had more than 20 percent support in parliamentary elections and formed part of a coalition government from 2013–2020. Their support decreased in the 2010s, except for an upturn in 2015–17, which is often said to be connected with the European refugee crisis. Far-right organizations opposing immigration and "Islamization" have very few members, and very few people show up to participate in their demonstrations.

A second potential fault line is the question of center versus periphery, particularly between the north and south. Many national political debates are in some way related to questions of resources, employment, and location of infrastructure. Indeed, in 1972 and 1994, this was an important focal point of the debate about the EEC and the EU.

In the north, debates will often be framed as criticism of politicians in Oslo who make decisions from afar without regard for local interests. At times, this can be the source of debates on the role of NATO both because several Northern Norwegian communities are economically dependent on military installations and because other communities fear becoming a potential target for attack due to such installations.

An important political debate in the far north of the country is the forced amalgamation of the two northern-

most counties, Troms and Finnmark, in 2017. The consolidation caused a lot of resentment in the former Finnmark, where, in an unofficial referendum, 87 percent opposed joining the counties.<sup>10</sup> Many local authorities have also refused to accept the reform and still hope it will be reversed by a new government following the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2021.

According to local sources, there have been attempts from the Russian General Consulate in Kirkenes (the local capital of Sør-Varanger, located near the border) to play on this tension by openly supporting local opposition to the reform against the politicians in Oslo, while simultaneously speaking about the traditional warm relationship between locals and Russians, which southerners do not understand.

## ATTEMPTS AT INFLUENCING

In April 2015, there was an attempt to launch a Norwegian-language edition of the propaganda website Sputnik News. The attempt ended in March 2016. The website failed to make an impact as Norwegian mainstream media did not quote or refer to it.

A 2020 report by the Industrial and Technical Research Foundation (*Stiftelsen for industriell og teknisk forskning*, better known as SINTEF) found no attempts to influence the 2019 local election. This corresponds with the conclusion of other researchers.<sup>11</sup>

In the fall of 2020, the Norwegian Parliament was hacked by the Russian group Fancy Bear. In early 2021, the Norwegian police security agency (PST) warned that foreign intelligence might try to influence public opinion and debate.

We should therefore be looking for attempts to nudge the Norwegian audience and policy makers in a more Kremlin-friendly direction or create doubt about the wisdom of the current transatlantic cooperation.

Some have interpreted the so-called Arctic refugee crisis in 2015–16, when thousands of migrants and refugees, many of which had lived in Russia for years, crossed the Norwegian-Russian border on bicycles,

9 Øystein Bogen, "Norway: Exploiting the Balancing Acts," in Alina Polyakova (ed.), *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 3.0*, Atlantic Council (website), December 4, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Kremlins-Trojan-Horses-3.pdf>, 17-22 (19).

10 Her er de endelige resultatene fra folkeavstemningen om fylkessammenslåing, Nordlys, May 16, 2018, <https://www.nordlys.no/alta/berlevag/batsfjord/her-er-de-endelige-resultatene-fra-folkeavstemningen-om-fylkessammenslaing/s/5-34-858080>.

11 Tor Olav Grøtan et al., På leting etter utenlandsk informasjonspåvirkning. En analyse av det norske kommunestyre—og fylkestingsvalget 2019. SINTEF, November 28, 2019, 6, [https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/4d850821991746ecbcd9477a475baf73/sintef-rapport\\_2019-01292\\_gradering\\_agen.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/4d850821991746ecbcd9477a475baf73/sintef-rapport_2019-01292_gradering_agen.pdf).



as an attempt at “hybrid warfare.”<sup>12</sup> If we, for a moment, accept this interpretation, the goals could be to demonstrate Russian power and corresponding Norwegian powerlessness, as well as to sow discord over immigration. If so, it could perhaps be seen in the context of the ongoing war in Syria and the broader refugee crisis, which many Europeans both on the right and left have blamed on Western intervention in the Arab Spring on the side of anti-government forces, particularly the bombing of Libya. Indeed, RT and other Russian media, as well as the alternative media discussed in this article, have frequently promoted the narrative that the West, and particularly the US, bears responsibility for the crisis. Some have also interpreted Rogozin’s visit as an attempt to create insecurity in Norway regarding sovereignty over Svalbard.

Norway has also for years been a target of disinformation concerning the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. In the early 2010s, Russian media ran several interviews with a Russian woman previously married to a Norwegian man, who claimed that incest and sexual abuse of children was part of Norwegian culture. This was mixed together with claims that Norwegian authorities promoted alternative sexual orientations and gender identities to young children and that Norwegian Child Welfare Services violently abducted children from Russian and East European families living in the country.<sup>13</sup> While the target audience was Russian, not Norwegian, the accusations influenced opinion elsewhere, particularly in the Czech Republic and the Baltic States.<sup>14</sup> Some Norwegian citizens have also taken part in this by cooperating with Russian and Eastern European activists involved in disinformation, with or without knowledge of who they are cooperating with.<sup>15</sup>

A 2020 report from the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (Stratcom) mentions three Norwegian actors who have been involved in so-called information laundering (meaning the penetration of false or deceitful information into a domestic media “ecosystem,” with the help of a network of intermediaries that

legitimizes false or deceitful information until it eventually find its way into mainstream media).<sup>16</sup> The actors mentioned were the organization People’s Diplomacy Norway, *Friheten* (“Freedom” the organ of the old, pro-Soviet Communist Party), and the blog *Derimot* (discussed further below). The information was about a Crimean journalist and academic who had been denied a Russian visa to Norway and told to use a Ukrainian passport. This was framed as Europe denying Crimean citizens fundamental rights.

These actors have little or no influence on Norwegian public opinion, but leading members of People’s Diplomacy Norway have been portrayed as important by Russian media and have been targeted for consumption by a Russian audience. While the story did not penetrate mainstream media, the case illustrates that alternative media can play a role in such information laundering operations and that there are such media in Norway.

## ABSENCE OF SIGNIFICANT PRO-RUSSIAN PARTIES

There are currently no pro-Russian parties represented in the Norwegian Parliament. Neither are there any signs of cooperation or any kind of Russian support for Norwegian parties. While there have been statements and resolutions that can be interpreted as being of a *Putinversteher* character (that is, a Putin sympathizer) from leftist parties and politicians, they should be viewed in a context of traditional opposition to NATO than as pro-Russian or pro-Kremlin as such. This is less the case on the political right, where *Putinversteher* attitudes sometimes go hand in hand with national-conservative attitudes similar to those found in some continental right-wing parties.

In September 2014, the SV adopted a resolution where NATO was partly blamed for Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere. The statement also called on Norway to withdraw its forces from NATO-led train-

12 Ole Martin Mortvedt, *Russland står bak flyktning—strømmen over Storskog*. Politiforum, November 11, 2015, <https://www.politiforum.no/nyheter/russland-star-bak-flyktning--strommen-over-storskog/126460>; Kjetil Stormark, *Flyktningestrøm trolig russisk hybridkrig*. Aldrimer, November 6, 2015, <https://www.aldrimer.no/flyktningestrom-er-trolig-russisk-hybridkrig/>.

13 For a thorough study of the portrayal in Russian media, see Margarita Savinova, “De sier jo bare sannheten? En kvalitativ analyse av hvordan russiske kvinner bosatt i Norge fortolker nyheter om det norske Barnevernet fremstilt i russiske medier,” Master’s thesis in media studies, University of Bergen, fall 2016.

14 Inga Springe, “Putin’s Children,” *Re:Baltica*, January 10, 2016, <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2016/01/putins-children/>; John Færseth, “Kampen mot det norske barnevernet: Konspirasjonsteorier brukes for å vise fram ‘landet som stjeler barn,’” *Transit Magasin*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.transitmag.no/2020/05/12/kritikken-mot-norske-barnevernet/>.

15 John Færseth, *Fyrtårnet i øst: Putins Russland og vestlige ekstremister* (Oslo: Humanist forlag, 2021), pp. 364-369.

16 Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic Region, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, November 2020, [https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/nato\\_information\\_laundering\\_small\\_file\\_10-12-2020-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit](https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/nato_information_laundering_small_file_10-12-2020-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit).

ing exercises in the Baltics. Similarly, two members of the party Rødt wrote in an opinion piece published in the newspaper *Dagbladet* in February 2015, that the annexation of Crimea was a reaction to “the Western-supported Maidan coup” in Ukraine, and how the US since 1991 had “purposefully been moving its military, political and economic positions further and further in the direction of the Kremlin, in a manner perceived as threatening by Russians.”<sup>17</sup> Several members of the party have also accused the post-Maidan Ukrainian authorities of being dominated by fascists.

As we will see below, there has been at least two examples of individual party members who have knowingly or unknowingly contributed to disinformation regarding the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. In addition, a small number of local party organizations have invited a person who can be considered a propagandist to speak about the conflict in Syria.<sup>18</sup>

The Progress Party can be described as anti-immigration and straddles between conservatism and right-wing populism. While the party’s official policies are staunchly pro-NATO and pro-transatlantic, there have been examples of prominent figures in the party, including MP Christian Tybring-Gjedde and former party leader Carl I. Hagen, who have made statements in favor of recognizing Crimea as Russian and lifting sanctions. Hagen has also appeared on the Russian TV channel RT, discussing populism, repeating his views on Crimea as being historically Russian, accusing NATO of aggression and expansionism, and calling NATO Secretary General and former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg a member of the elite who is surrounded by generals. A 2018 article by commentator Frank Rossavik in the daily newspaper *Aftenposten* even spoke of segments of the Progress Party as adopting the attitude “the West is always to blame,” which is traditionally associated with the political left.<sup>19</sup>

Both Hagen and Tybring-Gjedde can be described as belonging to the right-wing, anti-Islam and nationalist wing of the party. Tybring-Gjedde is an outspoken critic of multiculturalism who has proposed to shift the party

toward right-wing populism, and in 2020 he nominated then-President Donald Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>20</sup> In general—from looking at Facebook posts, comments sections, and similar material—there appears to be sympathy for Russia in national-conservative and anti-immigration/anti-Islam circles that partly coincides with the right wing of Progress Party voters. There are many examples of articles and clips from RT being shared in “fan groups” for right-wing Progress Party politicians.<sup>21</sup> This seems to be based on an interpretation of Russia as a force standing up against Islamic terror and expansionism in Chechnya, as well as in Syria, which is viewed as a fight between the secular Assad regime and its Russian ally against the Islamic State group and Islamic terrorists in general.

Within the anti-immigration right, some hold the view that the refugee crisis was caused not only by the Libya bombing, but also by Western, and mainly U.S., support for oppositional forces across the Middle East, stemming from a naive belief that such support would further democracy and human rights and possibly provoke a regime change. Such support, so the argument goes, plunged the region into chaos, unleashed Islamist terrorism, and opened the way for an influx of refugees. Therefore, support should have been given to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and others who kept the region under control. This view is not uncommon in social media, including in the comments sections of the alternative media described here.

The only political party that can be described as pro-Kremlin in Norway today is the small Christian conservative party *Partiet De Kristne* (“Christians”) whose leader Erik Selle has commended Russia’s social conservatism, particularly regarding LGBTQ rights, “traditional families,” and the role of religion in society as opposed to Western “Christophobia.” Selle is also in favor of lifting sanctions on Russia and recognizing the annexation of Crimea. The party has no seats in the parliament but is represented in six municipal governments.

Indeed, there appears to be some support for Russia’s perceived social conservatism in Norwegian char-

17 Stian Bragtvedt and Aslak Storaker, “Situasjonen i Ukraina kan føre til en storkrig,” *Dagbladet*, February 20, 2015, <https://www.dagbladet.no/2015/02/20/kultur/meninger/kronikk/debatt/ukraina/37806427/>.

18 John Færseth, Tåpenes antiimperialisme, *Minerva*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.minervanett.no/kari-jaqueson-konspirasjonsteorier-rod-tapenes-antiimperialisme/181012>.

19 Frank Rossavik, “Er det forsvarspolitisk halal i Frp å erstatte russere med muslimer i fiendebildet?” *Aftenposten*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kommentar/i/6nGdbr/er-det-forsvarspolitisk-halal-i-frp-aa-erstatte-russere-med-muslimer-i>.

20 “Trump ringte Tybring-Gjedde,” *Aftenposten*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/politikk/i/IE1a99/trump-ringte-tybring-gjedde>; “Anti-immigrant Progress Oslo head resigns,” *The Local*, January 7, 2014, <https://www.thelocal.no/20140107/progress-anti-immigrant-firebrand-resigns>.

21 Mathias Fischer, “Frp-nestoren som russisk propaganda,” *TV2*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.tv2.no/a/10275708/>.

ismatic and evangelical Christian circles. One example of this is the Christians party, another is the Pentecostal pastor Jan-Aage Torp who has hosted Russia's ambassador in his TV program *Hovedstaden* (Capital). This demographic also forms an important part of the political bedrock of the Progress Party. Indeed, it should be noted that both Hagen and Tybring-Gjedde's statements in favor of recognizing the annexation of Crimea and lifting of the sanctions were made in speeches held at the Oslo Symposium conference, which is often considered the most important arena for right-wing political Christianity in Norway.

## THE NORWEGIAN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA SPHERE

The Norwegian alternative media sphere started to evolve in the late 2000s. As in most countries, it is difficult to define what constitutes alternative media—indeed, a defining characteristic of alternative media seems to be an active positioning vis-à-vis traditional media and professional journalists in the form of claims to represent a challenge or a counterposition to a described hegemony regarding perspectives and agenda setting.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it does not include online newspapers, magazines, and periodicals who abide by the same rules of conduct and ethics as traditional media, as set down by press organizations.

The Norwegian alternative media landscape varies from the radical left as represented by the website *Radikal Portal* (Radical Portal) to the extreme right, represented by the website *Frihetskamp* (Freedom Struggle) owned by the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement. Some are nonpolitical, or outside the normal political landscape, and devoted to various kinds of fringe conspiracy theories, with *Nyhetsspeilet* (The News Mirror) as the most well-known. Sometimes these conspiracy websites also include material about alternative spirituality and medicine and may be openly antisemitic. An idiosyncratic aspect of Norwegian conspiracy culture is that the Labour Party often plays an important role among the perceived hidden forces controlling the state.

The alternative media who have received the most attention by journalists and researchers are the three

right-wing websites *Resett*, *Document*, and *Rights* (ran by the anti-Islamic and anti-immigration think-tank Human Rights Service), and to a lesser extent *Steigan*. *Resett*, *Document*, and *Rights* are each characterized by various degrees of nativist, anti-immigration, and anti-Islamic rhetoric, as well as a critical attitude to "political correctness," "leftist" academia, mainstream media, and most political parties, with the possible exception of the Progress Party.

This section will have as its main focus *Resett*, as well as the Christian and socially conservative site *The Herland Report*, and the website *Steigan*, which is owned and edited by Pål Steigan, who for decades was an influential Marxist. While sharing an anti-immigration and anti-Islam message with *Resett*, *Document* and *Rights* have not shown any particular interest in matters relating to Russia. In addition, *Document* has characterized Russia as authoritarian and a threat to Europe, and criticized *Resett*, *The Herland Report*, and *Steigan* for their perceived whitewashing. *Rights* has blamed Russia for the so-called Arctic refugee crisis. They are thus largely outside the scope of this study.

In a survey from 2019, 7 percent, 6 percent, and 4 percent reported to be reading the websites *Resett*, *Document*, and *Rights* respectively on a weekly basis. At present there are no known numbers for *Steigan* and *The Herland Report*. A commonly held but unverified assumption is that the typical reader of all these alternative media tends to be middle-aged and older, and male. One percent reported to be reading *Radikal Portal* on a weekly basis. The same survey reported low trust in alternative media among the general population.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this, alternative media score high in number of engagements, that is, the number of shares, "likes," and comments on stories in social media. Indeed in 2020, both *Resett* and *Document* scored higher than some major newspapers here. According to a recent report, the high level of engagements is highly dependent on a network of Facebook groups. Many of the most important groups share a worldview in which Norway and Norwegian culture is threatened by immigration, corrupt politicians, and anonymous, international power constellations.<sup>24</sup>

Neither of the three receive any form of press support, and income streams from advertising are low due

22 Holt, Figenschou, and Frischlich, "Key dimensions of Alternative News Media," *Digital Journalism*, June 13, 2019.

23 Digital News Report 2020: Norway, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021, Compiled with the help of Hallvard Moe and Hilde Sakariassen, University of Bergen, <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/norway-2020/>.

24 "Her er ekkokammeret som gjør alternative medier til virale vinnere," *Faktisk*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/0q4rw/her-er-ekkokammeret-som-gjor-alternative-medier-til-virale-vinnere>.

to an official boycott of—particularly—the right-wing *Resett*. This means that they depend on donations, although some of *Resett*'s content is behind paywall.

*Steigan*, *Resett*, and *The Herland Report* have for several years been publishing content that can, to various degrees, qualify as pro-Kremlin or supportive of a pro-Kremlin discourse. This includes content written by known pro-Kremlin authors, who have also been interviewed as experts. Some of this content borders on conspiracy theories, albeit of a more “reasonable” nature and therefore also of a more believable type than what can be found on *Nyhetspeilet*. This is particularly true about *Steigan*. At least since 2013–14, *Steigan* has been publishing content written by or about persons with a background from the right-wing conspiracy sphere who are today regarded as pro-Kremlin propagandists, particularly regarding the conflict in Syria. Interestingly, all three websites have published material produced by, or have interviewed many of the same contributors despite their apparent political differences.

*Resett*, *The Herland Report*, and *Steigan* were all recommended by the Russian Embassy in Oslo in a Facebook post from February 23, 2018. The post criticized the website *Aldrimer* (Nevermore), which deals with military and security issues including disinformation, and recommended them as better sources.

## THE HERLAND REPORT

The most openly pro-Kremlin Norwegian alternative media is *The Herland Report*, which is owned and edited by author and commentator Hanne Nabintu Herland. It consists of written articles, as well as web TV programs that can also be viewed on their YouTube channel, which mainly takes the form of interviews.

Herland has an education in comparative religion. She can be best described as a Christian and social conservative, a defender of “traditional values,” and a critic of feminism and the LGBTQ movement. Not least, she is an outspoken opponent of “political correctness.” Herland also believes that today’s Western world is suffering

from “anti-White racism.”

Herland has written several books, a few of which have been translated into English and published by US Christian publishers. Her books have been praised by US Senators Ron Paul and Richard Black, both of whom have also been guests on her web TV broadcasts. On December 25, 2014, she was also interviewed by RT (which, at the time, was Russia Today).

According to Herland, the West has abandoned its Christian roots and instead embraced hedonism and a “liberal totalitarianism,” which is as bad—or as strict—as National Socialism was. This has both made its peoples wards of an ever-growing state and served to enrich a small number of elites. At the same time, Marxists and feminists have taken over universities and media and fooled women into believing that happiness is to be found in careers instead of in finding a loving husband. At the same time, men have grown weak. Some of her diatribes border on conspiracy theories, as when Norwegian authorities are accused of being more concerned with the opinions of the World Health Organization, Bill Gates, and other “globalists” than with domestic experts in their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

As opposed to the decline of the West, *The Herland Report* has repeatedly praised Putin for turning Russia away from both the Communist past and the Western liberalism and hedonism that was forced upon the country in the 1990s, and embracing Russia’s Orthodox Christian roots.<sup>26</sup> Being opposed to Western interventions and the Arab Spring, the website has supported Russia’s war in Syria, as well as criticized the sanctions related to the war against Ukraine.

Herland’s guests have included Hendrik Weber,<sup>27</sup> a local politician from the party Rødt who has visited Russian-occupied Crimea several times as head of the organization People’s Diplomacy Norway, and has taken part in the 2019 “Yalta International Economic Forum.” Weber has also made numerous visits to the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic where he met with the late “Prime Minister” Aleksandr Zakharchenko and “Minister of Foreign Affairs” Nataliya Nikonorova. There are also several pictures of Weber in Donetsk with members of

25 Hanne Nabintu Herland, “Corona skandalen: Det norske flagget er populistsymbol?” *The Herland Report*, May 7, 2020,

<https://hannenabintuherland.com/europa/corona-skandalen-det-norske-flagget-er-na-et-negativt-populistsymbol-stotte-til-vebjorn-selbekk/>.

26 Hanne Nabintu Herland, “Russia from State rule Atheism to Christian Orthodoxy under #Conservative Putin,” *The Herland Report*, December 15, 2019, <https://hannenabintuherland.com/europa/russias-turn-from-leninism-to-christian-orthodoxy-under-putin-choosing-opposite-path-than-the-hedonist-west-herland-report/>.

27 Hendrik Weber, “Interview with the Founder of People Diplomacy Norway, Hendrik Weber on his visit to Donetsk: We, the people, want to hear their story (The Herland Report),” Hendrik Weber (website), March 13, 2018, <https://www.hendrikweber.net/l/interview-with-the-founder-of-people-diplomacy-norway-hendrik-weber-on-his-visit-to-donetsk-we-the-people-want-to-hear-their-story-the-herland-report/>.

the nationalist motorcycle club “The Night Wolves.”<sup>28</sup> Weber has written several articles in Norwegian media defending the Russian occupation of Crimea; in 2018, he was an “election observer” in Crimea.

Another guest of Herland’s online broadcasts has been Bjørn Ditlef Nistad, a former academic who holds a PhD in Russian history of ideas. Nistad is also a frequent contributor of articles to the website, and has occasionally been used as an “expert source” for interviews. Nistad has been a faithful supporter of the Putin regime at least since the late 2000s, frequently writing letters to newspapers and taking part in online debates. In 2018, he visited Donetsk as an “election observer.” Nistad was also a contributor to the short-lived Norwegian edition of Sputnik News. In addition to supporting the Kremlin line in everything from wars to anti-LGBTQ policies, Nistad frequently writes about other matters like immigration (where he is a strong critic of Norwegian policies), climate change, and—recently—the COVID-19 pandemic, which in his opinion is being deliberately exaggerated, and criticizes the government’s measures against it.

A third pro-Kremlin guest on Herland’s broadcasts has been professor Glenn Diesen of the University of South-Eastern Norway. Diesen is a frequent, paid contributor to the RT website where he has been accused of cheering for Putin, condemning the West, and attempting to promote alternative theories about controversies involving Russia, such as the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, and the attempted murders of Sergei Skripal and Alexey Navalny.<sup>29</sup> Diesen has also written several opinion pieces in Norwegian news media, defending the Russian perspective. Some of these have been written together with Arne Treholt, who in 1985 was sentenced to 20 years in prison for treason and espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, another of Herland’s guests is Eva Thomassen, a sociologist and writer who has written about the war in Syria from a pro-Assad and pro-Kremlin point of view for several years and has visited Crimea as part of Weber’s People’s Diplomacy delegation.

Herland’s website is probably not very influential in terms of viewers and readers. While previously a fre-

quent, although very controversial, voice in mainstream media, she is today a niche phenomenon. It is reasonable to believe that she still has a degree of leverage in some Christian charismatic and conservative circles, where there appears to be support for Russia. She has made programs for the Christian TV channel Visjon TV, which has also featured her books.<sup>31</sup> This is the same channel that hosts Torp’s program.

## RESETT

The editor-in-chief of *Resett*, Helge Lurås, is a former employee of the UN High Commissioner in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. The website can be described as right-wing populist, with a strong anti-elitist narrative that is also highly critical of mainstream media. *Resett* is critical of immigration and Islam and has even published articles speculating on racial theories about natural caste hierarchies (although this is not representative of the website as such). Most of the news coverage—as opposed to commentary—consists of clippings from the news agency NTB, or retellings of articles from other newspapers. However, *Resett* also has its own foreign affairs journalist. The website holds a positive attitude toward Trump and warns about the dangers of leftist radicalization in the US. In 2020, it also devoted a lot of space to the alleged links between Hunter Biden (President Joe Biden’s son) and Ukraine.

Outside of *Resett*, Lurås has previously been a critic of NATO “expansionism and aggression,” including both “out of area” operations in Libya and elsewhere, and what he calls attempts at bringing Ukraine and Georgia over to the Western side. Similarly, he has explained the annexation of Crimea as an understandable action to the same expansion by a country that is simply acting rationally according to its interests and the global situation as viewed from Russia. According to Lurås, Russia does not want a conflict with the West, and the West should rather focus on the inflow of refugees and migrants.<sup>32</sup> Since 2014, Lurås has also opposed sanctions against the Assad regime, instead advocating military support for

28 Per Anders Hoel and John Færseth, “Norsk politiker gjør omstridte reiser for Russlands sak,” *Vårt Land*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.vl.no/nyheter/2021/03/24/norsk-politiker-gjor-omstridte-reiser-for-russlands-sak/>.

29 Øystein Bogen, “Professor beskyldes for å drive russisk propaganda fra norsk universitet,” *TV2*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.tv2.no/a/11932156/>.

30 “Arne Treholt,” *Store norske leksikon* (website), [https://snl.no/Arne\\_Treholt](https://snl.no/Arne_Treholt).

31 Maren Sæbø, “Med palestinerne som statister,” *Humanist*, June 15, 2015, <https://humanist.no/2015/06/med-palestinerne-som-statister/> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P86lwz7jSK4>.

32 Jan-Morten Bjørnbakk, “Et NATO ute av kurs,” *Dagsavisen*, September 4, 2014, <https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/verden/et-nato-ute-av-kurs-1.291194>.

Assad as the only alternative to the Islamic State group and to prevent a further outflow of refugees.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, there is less of this content on *Resett*, although articles have communicated appeals from Assad for refugees to return home and advised Norwegian authorities to help them do so without mentioning the fact that the majority of those killed in the war have been killed by the regime and its Russian allies.

In 2018–2019, the website published several articles casting doubt on the April 2018 Douma gas attack, claiming that the attack was disputed within the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons—a false claim that was put forth by Russia but which has later been debunked<sup>34</sup>—as well as condemning Norwegian mainstream media for spreading “disinformation” that led to a Western missile attack on Syrian government forces.<sup>35</sup>

Since 2017, Nistad has been a frequent contributor to the website. Nistad has written about Russia and Ukraine with an openly pro-Putin slant. An interesting video segment is a conversation between Lurås and Nistad, where Nistad warned against Western hubris and advised the West to lay aside “human rights rhetoric,” the idea of “liberal universalism,” and the idea of history moving in one direction toward liberal democracy. Instead, we should respect the rights of all countries to make laws reflecting its own values. Nistad also expressed the belief that Norway could learn from Russia, where leaders follow the will of the people, when it comes to immigration.

It should be noted that *Resett*, unlike other media discussed here, has managed to influence the media agenda once by breaking a scandal involving the then leader of the party Venstre (“Left,” which despite its name is a liberal-conservative party), eventually making mainstream media write about it.<sup>36</sup>

## STEIGAN

The owner and editor of Steigan is a prominent far-left veteran from the 1970s and 1980s. Steigan was one of the founders of the Workers’ Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) (*Arbeidernes Kommunistparti (marxist-leninistene)*, AKP (m-l)) and also the leader from 1975–1984.

The AKP (m-l) was a numerically insignificant Maoist group, founded by what was mostly young academics in the early 1970s. Due to its Maoist and openly Stalinist views, its brand of Marxism was, in its early stages, combined with elements of nationalism (particularly the idea of national independence), agrarian romanticism, and a somewhat conservative view of many aspects of modernity. Internationally, it was strongly against both superpowers and Norwegian membership in the EEC (later EU), while embracing third world liberation movements and the Chinese Communist party. It was ideologically extremist: Many members, including Steigan, would for years deny the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia. For several decades the party also spoke of the need for an armed revolution. However, it was neither in contact with, nor supported, European leftist terrorist groups like the German Red Army Faction.

While the AKP (m-l) was very small both regarding membership and popular support, it was highly visible in the 1970s student movement. Many members and sympathizers would eventually go on to achieve prominent positions in Norwegian academia, media, arts and culture, trade unions, and the NGO sector. The story of the AKP (m-l) has therefore been the subject of books, films, and academic research that cover the entire spectrum from nostalgia to former members regretting their association with what they now regard as a dangerous cult. It has also been of interest for researchers of totalitarianism. Its role is still periodically debated, although the history of AKP (m-l) is probably getting increasingly less interesting for generations born long after its heyday.

The AKP (m-l) eventually joined with what is regarded as its successor party, Rødt. Rødt has shed most of its revolutionary rhetoric, and today embraces a democratic and populist socialism. The AKP (m-l) also founded

33 Helge Lurås, “Støtt Assad militært,” *Dagbladet*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/stott-assad-militaert/60169858>.

34 Henrik S. Werenskiold, “Wikileaks-avsløringer: OPCW fordreide sannheten rundt det kjemiske angrepet i Douma i Syria i 2018,” *Resett*, December 17, 2019, <https://resett.no/2019/12/17/wikileaks-avsloringer-opcw-fordreide-sannheten-rundt-det-kjemiske-angrepet-i-douma-i-syria-i-2018/>; Patrick Wintour and Bethan McKernan, “Inquiry strikes blow to Russian denials of Syria chemical attack,” *Guardian*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/07/inquiry-strikes-blow-to-russian-denials-of-syria-chemical-attack>.

35 Henrik S. Werenskiold, “Nervegass ble ikke brukt av Assad-regjeringen i Syria i april, konkluderer en rapport fra OPCW,” *Resett*, July 8, 2018, <https://resett.no/2018/07/08/nervegass-ble-ikke-brukt-av-assad-regjeringen-i-syria-i-april-konkluderer-en-rapport-fra-opcw/>.

36 Birgitte Iversen, “Grande mener politisk agenda lå bak kornåker-historien *Resett* publiserte,” *Journalisten*, November 5, 2020, <https://journalisten.no/aftenposten-helge-luras-kortnytt/grande-mener-politisk-agenda-la-bak-kornaker-historien-resett-publiserte/434880>.

the newspaper *Klassekampen* (Class Struggle), which has for decades been an important and influential daily newspaper, read by Norwegians from across the political spectrum.

It is necessary to retell the story of the AKP (m-l) because Steigan's long association with the party and its successors has given him a strong network, visibility, and potential influence he would otherwise not have had.

Terje Tvedt, a history professor with connections to the AKP (m-l), has contributed articles to the website. Tvedt is also a prominent critic of foreign aid as an example of Norwegian interventionism.

The underlying narrative on the website is pessimistic regarding the future of the West. The US is viewed as expansionist and controlled by nondemocratic forces. Similarly, the EU is perceived as undemocratic and deeply dysfunctional. And both are in decline as new centers of power are rising, particularly China but also Russia. Over the last year there have also been several articles about the role of Gates in the development of COVID-19 vaccines, including conspiracy theories about plans for microchipping people through vaccination.

While nominally still a leftist, Steigan and other contributors have on several occasions linked or referred to "anti-globalist" and right-wing US conspiracy websites like Moon of Alabama, Mint Press News, and 21st Century Wire, the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity, and even Alex Jones's Infowars. At least one of Steigan's sources, the radical-right and pro-Trump website One America News Network, has direct ties to Sputnik News.<sup>37</sup> Another frequent source is RT, which is not only used as a source regarding Russia and former Soviet countries, but also in articles on other topics.

A recurring topic on the website is that US intelligence is working to foment regime changes in several countries through "color revolutions." Thus, Steigan is highly critical of the NGO sector, which is seen as a tool for the CIA and George Soros. According to Steigan, both the Ukrainian Euromaidan, the Arab Spring uprisings, and the current unrest in Belarus are all examples of this. Similarly, there are plans to do the same in Russia. Thus, Steigan has been highly skeptical of most demonstrations against the Putin regime and has referred to

opposition figure Navalny as a pawn in the CIA's and Soros's attempts at fomenting unrest in Russia with the help of the NGO sector to bring about regime change.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes this is combined with "whataboutism," where Western media are accused of focusing more on protests in Russia and other post-Soviet countries than on the French Yellow Vests.

The website has cast doubts on Russia's role in the poisoning of the Skripals and Navalny. In both instances, the website has put forward alternative theories about the poisonings as acts of provocation to sour relations between Russia and the West and possibly to hinder construction of the North Stream 2 pipeline. In the Skripal case, Ukrainian fascists with government connections have been put forth as a more likely perpetrator than the Russian secret services.<sup>39</sup>

At least until recently when it became associated with the protests against lockdown and COVID 19-vaccines, Steigan was perhaps best known for conveying a pro-Kremlin and later a pro-Assad perspective on the Ukraine conflict and the Syrian civil war, particularly after Russia's intervention there.

As stated earlier, Steigan tends to interpret various uprisings as US and Soros-generated attempts at regime change, and the Western-backed NGO sector as a tool for this. During the winter of 2014, the site therefore published a number of articles repeating claims about Maidan being dominated by fascists, and later about how the West cooperated with them to stage a coup, install a pro-Western government, and thus push Russia back. Steigan blames Ukrainian authorities and their Western backers for the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass, and his solution for the latter is for Ukraine to simply stop attacking the rebel "republics." After the events in Odessa on May 2, 2014, where a number of "anti-Maidan" activists were killed in a tragic fire after a bloody fight with pro-Ukrainian activists in the center of the city, Steigan became a proponent of the "massacre" narrative about unarmed men, women, and elderly having being killed in cold blood by fascists.

As with *Resett* and *The Herland Report*, Nistad has contributed several articles to the website. The same is true, though to a lesser extent, about Weber.

37 Kevin Poulsen, "The Hell of Working at Trump's New Favorite Network," *The Daily Beast*, May 18, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-hell-of-working-at-trumps-new-favorite-tv-channel-one-america-news-network>.

38 Pål Steigan, "Protestene mot korrupsjon i Russland," Steigan, June 13, 2017, <https://steigan.no/2017/06/protestene-mot-korrupsjon-i-russland/>.

39 Pål Steigan, "Ukraina håper på at forgiftningen i Salisbury vil være 'en vekker' for Vesten," Steigan, March 16, 2018, <https://steigan.no/2018/03/ukraina-haper-pa-at-forgiftningen-i-salisbury-vil-vaere-en-vekker-for-vesten/>.

Pål Steigan, "Sirkus Novitsjok i gang igjen," Steigan, September 3, 2019, <https://steigan.no/2020/09/sirkus-novitsjok-i-gang-igjen/>.

## HOW CONSPIRACY THEORISTS BECAME “JOURNALISTS”

Regarding Syria, *Steigan* has been something of a conduit for articles by conspiracy theorists-turned-propagandists Patrick Henningsen, Eva Bartlett, and Vanessa Beeley and has featured them as sources and subjects of articles.

Henningsen, Beeley, and Bartlett belong to a group of bloggers from the world of conspiracy theories, who have been promoted as sources, journalists, and expert commentators by RT and *Sputnik News* since the Russian intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015. Their role can be said to help promote the intervention as a just war against Islamist terror, and particularly to discredit the organization Syria Civil Defense, often referred to as the White Helmets, due to their documentation of war crimes by the regime and its Russian allies, by casting doubt on what actually happened. Another and related role has been to cast doubt on regime gas attacks.

Henningsen has a background in what can irreverently be called the “tin foil hat” world of conspiracy theories: He is the editor of the right-wing conspiracy website *21st Century Wire* (referred to by RT as an “independent news and analysis site”) where Beeley is the co-editor, and a former contributor to Alex Jones’s *Infowars*. He has also been a guest on the conspiracy-gone-alt-right internet radio *Red Ice Creations*, where he claimed that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the late leader of the Islamic State group, was actually a paid actor, working for Israel.

Beeley and Bartlett are bloggers and activists who previously focused on the Israel-Palestine conflict, something that might or might not have led them to blame Israel for the conflict in Syria. Before gaining status as journalists and commentators, both had made antisemitic statements and Beeley had participated in a panel conversation with known Holocaust deniers. Today, both are regarded as influential disseminators of content in RT and similar media about the White Helmets, which is frequently retweeted and thus amplified on Twitter by Russian Embassies and bot accounts.<sup>40</sup>

Voices like Henningsen, Beeley, and others who were already critical of US policies, which they perceive as being controlled by a “deep state” or “globalists,” have been actively sought out by elements in Russia and given new and larger platforms beginning in 2015–16. This included invitations to events in Moscow, meetings and interview opportunities with figures of authority, regime-facilitated travels to government-controlled parts of Syria, and meetings with top figures in the Assad regime, as well as being cast as journalists and commentators.<sup>41</sup>

Besides using Henningsen, Beeley, Bartlett, and others as sources and contributors, in February 2019, *Steigan* even arranged a conference in Oslo called *Mot Dag* (the name can be freely translated as “Towards daybreak,” which was also the name of an influential Norwegian leftist think tank in the interwar era). Speakers included Beeley, Bartlett, and Henningsen, as well as the anti-LGBTQ activist Posie Parker. Interestingly, professor Tvedt was also a speaker, which might imply that the segment that considers *Steigan* “within the pale” is bigger and more influential than often believed—particularly among older generations.

Thomassen and the fitness instructor and blogger Kari Jaquesson are prominent Norwegian proponents of the Syria narrative about “false” gas attacks and the White Helmets who have also been frequent contributors to *Steigan*. Both have participated in what appears to be regime-facilitated trips to Syria since 2015. At least one such trip was taken with Beeley.

It might be of interest here that both Jaquesson, Beeley, and Henningsen took part in the “Media on trial” event in London in November 2017. The event was organized by the obscure group *Frome Stop War*, and also featured well-known journalist John Pilger and Professor Tim Heyward of the University of Edinburgh. Participants at the event accused mass media of spreading propaganda and falsehoods, particularly about the war in Syria, and denying access to alternative views.<sup>42</sup>

Beeley and Henningsen were also scheduled to appear on a subsequent, similar event in April 2018, which would also feature Russian-born filmmaker Andrey

40 Olivia Solon, “How Syria’s White Helmets became victims of an online propaganda machine,” *Guardian*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/syria-white-helmets-conspiracy-theories>.

41 See for instance Scott Lucas, “How an Obscure UK Blogger Became Russia’s Top Disinfo Warrior Over Syria’s White Helmets,” *EA World Review*, April 23, 2018, <https://eaworldview.com/2018/04/how-an-obscure-uk-blogger-became-russias-top-disinfo-warrior-over-syria/> (This has been clarified in greater detail during a personal conversation with professor Scott Lucas on September 12, 2020).

42 Robert Stuart, “Fabrication in BBC Panorama ‘Saving Syria’s Children.’ Analysis of the September 30, 2013, BBC Panorama documentary Saving Syria’s Children and related BBC News reports,” (Blog post), September 10, 2017, <https://bbcpanoramavingasyriaschildren.wordpress.com/2017/09/10/media-on-trial-with-john-pilger-19-october-2017-london/>; for the speeches and presentations held, see: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBw4BpvZZol4DKX1PtjbNFqWYKuu2HhQX>.



Nekrasov. The event was later canceled.<sup>43</sup> Nekrasov, a previous critic of the 2008 war in Georgia and the Putin regime, in 2016 went on to produce a highly controversial documentary called *The Magnitsky Act—Behind the Scenes*. The documentary claimed that the Russian tax accountant Sergei Magnitsky had neither been a whistleblower nor beaten to death in prison.

## OTHER WEBSITES

Other websites relevant to this topic are *Derimot* (Contrarywise) and *Midtifleisen* (which can roughly be translated as “in your face”). In terms of content and narrative, they are very similar to *Steigan*.

The leftist website *Radikal Portal* is unrelated to those mentioned above. It is liberal regarding LGBTQ rights, refugee, and migration questions, and opposes racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia. While it is not affiliated with any political parties, many of its contributors seem to be connected to the Rødt party. Several politicians from the party have also contributed opinion pieces, which makes it one of several arenas for debate within the Norwegian left.

During the early days of the Ukraine conflict, several articles on the website discussed the events in Kyiv as a “coup” and gave a lot of attention to the presence of far-right groups. Following the events in Odessa on May 2, 2014, articles with a “massacre” narrative appeared. One of these articles relied heavily on the organization *Borotba* (Struggle) as a source. *Borotba* is a Ukrainian leftist group that took part in attempts to establish “People’s republics” in Kharkiv and Odessa and was mentioned in a leaked email to Putin adviser Vladislav

Surkov as a voice that could be counted on to amplify propaganda in Ukraine.<sup>44</sup> It should be mentioned that later articles, to some extent, backtracked regarding reliance on *Borotba* as a source.

The article was written by a member of Rødt’s international committee, Aslak Storaker, who later conducted a highly uncritical interview with two communists from the “Donetsk People’s Republic” for the magazine *Sosialistisk Framtid* (Socialist Future).<sup>45</sup> One of the interviewees, Denis Chubakha, had three years earlier denied the presence of separatists in Donbass and expressed the right and wish of the population there to peacefully join with Russia.<sup>46</sup> The interview was conducted during the 19th World Festival of Youth and Students, which was held in Sochi in October 2017. WFYS is a traditional gathering of young Communists from all over the world and played a prominent role during the Cold War. The 19th festival was opened by Putin, who also spoke on the last day of the festival, and has been criticized for being “hijacked” by the Russian arrangers.<sup>47</sup> Storaker later wrote an article for the newspaper *Ny Tid* (New Time), mostly in praise of the festival.<sup>48</sup> He was also a co-author of the February 2015 opinion letter in *Dagbladet*, mentioned above. For a while, *Radikal Portal* also listed the Russian propaganda broadcaster RT in its link roll.

While not written by any of the staff of the website, *Radikal Portal* has also published opinion pieces expressing doubt about gas attacks in Syria. Two of these were written by another member of Rødt’s international committee, Ivar Espås Vangen, and another by a representative of the SV’s youth organization, Maria Bonita Igland.<sup>49</sup> It should, however, be noted that there were other opinion pieces that opposed this view and provid-

43 New Chartist Movement, Cancelled or postponed — Media on Trial Part IV: The Russian Connection, <https://www.newchartistmovement.org.uk/events/cancelled-or-posponed-media-on-trial-part-iv-the-russian-connection>; Kari Jaquesson, “Syria: Media på tiltalebenken og no-platforming,” *Steigan*, May 27, 2018, <https://steigan.no/2018/05/syria-media-pa-tiltalebenken-og-no-platforming/>.

44 Aslak Storaker, “A djevlene brenne i helvete,” *Radikal Portal*, May 9, 2014, <https://radikalportal.no/2014/05/09/la-djevlene-brenne-i-helvete/>; Yordan Tsalov, “Andrej Hunko and the Party Borotba: Propaganda from the Kremlin to the Bundestag,” *Bellingcat*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/07/28/andrej-hunko-and-the-party-borotba-propaganda-from-the-kremlin-to-the-bundestag/>.

45 Aslak Storaker, “Intervju med ukrainske kommunister,” *Sosialistisk Framtid*, April 29, 2018, <https://sosialistiskframtid.wordpress.com/2018/04/29/intervju-med-ukrainske-kommunister/#more-508>.

46 “Prozrenie Donbassa,” *Sovetskaja Rossija*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.sovross.ru/articles/1083/18698/comments/3>.

47 “Russia Hosts Soviet-Style Youth Festival as Putin Woos Under-30s,” *NDTV*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/russia-hosts-soviet-style-youth-festival-as-putin-woos-under-30s-1763073>; “Putin opens 19th World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi,” *TASS*, October 15, 2017, <https://tass.com/society/970806>; “Red Sochi: why did 10,000 young communists turn up to a trade fair on the Russian riviera?” *The Calvert Journal*, 2017, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/9134/red-sochi-world-festival-youth-students>.

48 Aslak Storaker, “The 19. World Youth Festival,” *Ny Tid*, November 10, 2017, <https://en.nytid.no/den-19-verdensungdomsfestivalen/>.

49 Ivar Espås Vangen, “Amerikanske raketter regner over Syria – hva nå?” *Radikal Portal*, April 7, 2017, <https://radikalportal.no/2017/04/07/amerikanske-raketter-regner-over-syria-hva-na/>; Ivar Espås Vangen, “Trump og giftgass – Syria som startpunkt for tredje verdenskrig?” *Radikal Portal*, April 11, 2018, <https://radikalportal.no/2018/04/11/trump-og-giftgass-syria-som-startpunkt-for-tredje-verdenskrig/>; Maria Bonita Igland, “Behovet for en sterk antikrigsbevegelse er større enn noen gang: Stopp bombingene av Syria!” *Radikal Portal*, April 11, 2017, <https://radikalportal.no/2017/04/11/behovet-for-en-sterk-antikrigsbevegelse-er-storre-en-noen-gang-stopp-bombingen-av-syria/>.

ed proof of the gas attacks.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, there is the website *Frihetskamp* (Struggle for freedom), which is connected to the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement. Like the organization itself, it has been strongly pro-Kremlin since 2009. This might be connected to the outbreak of the Arab Spring—indeed, Russia’s role in combating the “Zionist” enemies in Syria seems to have played an important part in creating pro-Kremlin sympathies in the organization. Also, Russia is portrayed as an enemy of globalization and a beacon of social conservatism regarding LGBTQ rights. Due to its openly extremist affiliation and content, the influence of *Frihetskamp* is probably minimal, also when compared to other sites mentioned here.

## CONCLUSIONS

As stated, there is at the moment no direct links connecting the Norwegian alternative media sphere to the Russian government or nongovernment figures or organizations, although there are individuals who are frequent contributors (Nistad, Thomassen, and Weber) who have taken part in election monitoring in Russian-controlled areas and went on organized trips to Russian-occupied Crimea and Donbass to meet government figures there. Similarly, there are individuals who have taken part in regime-facilitated trips to Syria, Russia’s ally, and events in Norway and Europe together with well-known propagandists. There is also the case of Diesen, who is a frequent contributor to Russian state media. All of these individuals have defended the Russian position in mainstream media.

Many of the articles published by these individuals appear all over the main alternative media landscape (*Resett*, *The Herland Report*, and *Steigan*), particularly those that in some way relate to Russia or its wars in Ukraine and Syria. Nistad has also written about immigration and COVID-19 measures.

There is little to no reference to the north-south division mentioned in the websites. This might be taken as an argument that they are not “on a mission” to sow discord or distrust in Norway as such, or it could simply reflect the fact that all the websites discussed here are “headquartered” in the Oslo area.

It should again be emphasized that regarding *Ra-*

*dikal Portal*, there is absolutely no reason to suspect a deliberate, hidden pro-Kremlin agenda from the editors or website as such.

The actual influence of these websites is difficult to ascertain. They are mostly considered “*persona non grata*” by mainstream media, meaning that they are usually not quoted or referred to as sources except when they themselves are part of the topic of news stories. Indeed, Lurås seems to have lost much of the standing he held as a political analyst when he became editor of *Resett*. The only place where Herland is regularly interviewed today outside her own website, is the Christian conservative newspaper *Norge IDAG* (Norway Today), which has a small audience, even when compared to other Christian newspapers.

As stated above, the only alternative media that has been surveyed regarding readers is *Resett*, which had an audience of about 6 percent although the number of casual readers is probably far larger. We have no similar statistics for *Steigan* or *The Herland Report*, although it is likely that *Steigan* has the larger audience of the two although probably not on the same level as *Resett*. According to the monitoring site Alexa, traffic to *Steigan* increased in early 2021, which might be due to its coverage—and support—for protests against COVID-19 measures. Interestingly, data from the same site suggests that *Resett* and *Steigan* share many readers.

What we do know, however, is that *Steigan* managed to achieve a high number of engagements in a recent survey, although lower than the anti-immigration and right-wing *Resett*, *Document*, and *Rights*.

As stated above, the “base” for alternative media in social media is a network of Facebook groups with a somewhat similar content, referred to in the survey as “The Norwegian echo chamber.”<sup>51</sup> The survey shows that this is, to some extent, also true about *Steigan*. Indeed, it is not at all uncommon to see links to *Steigan* being posted by persons and in social media groups belonging to anti-immigration, right-wing circles.

In addition, links to *Steigan* are often engaged with several groups connected to organizations with a known pro-Kremlin slant, particularly regarding Ukraine and Syria. Some of these are based in other Scandinavian countries, which means that the website has an inroad there as well, although this might mostly be a case of preaching to the already converted. Articles from *Steigan*

50 Ivar Espås Vangen, “Amerikanske raketter regner over Syria – hva nå?” *Radikal Portal*, April 7, 2017, <https://radikalportal.no/2017/04/07/amerikanske-raketter-regner-over-syria-hva-na/>.

51 “Her er ekkokammeret som gjør alternative medier til virale vinnere,” *Faktisk*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/0q4rw/her-er-ekkokammeret-som-gjor-alternative-medier-til-virale-vinnere>.

are also engaged with the “Norwegian echo chamber,” in many instances together with *Resett* and other right-wing media. This seems to be particularly true for groups concerned with skepticism to international organizations, including the EU, and to international treaties, particularly regarding migration.

Articles from *Resett* have also been shared by prominent Progress party politicians, which means that the website is probably read by some of them and a section of their voters. Similarly, the fact that *Steigan* has some well-known leftists among its contributors may mean that there exists a potential audience in some leftist circles.

Thus, while neither of the mentioned media can be seen as agenda-setters, they are highly visible in social media. It is therefore likely that *Steigan*, in particular, can function as a “funnel” of Kremlin-sponsored conspiracy theories, attitudes, and disinformation—as well as conspiracy theories in general—into a segment of the Norwegian left. This is particularly true given the fact that support for Norwegian participation in NATO operations abroad is lower among the voters of Rødt and the SV than in the general population.

Similarly, it is likely that both *Resett* and *Steigan* (and for that matter *The Herland Report*) can influence and strengthen a belief both on the right and left that the migration crisis was caused by American attempts at regime change in the Middle East through support for an opposition that turned out to be dangerous Islamists, thus strengthening the “NATO fault line” on the right, by relating it to immigration and Islam. They may also strengthen skepticism to international organizations and treaties. Obviously, this is particularly true among anti-immigration circles. Also, they may contribute to increased skepticism and doubt around the US and NATO, particularly in a post-Trump setting. They may also increase right-wing friendliness toward Russia as a force for stability and against Islamic terrorism.

Finally, there is the possibility that alternative media can contribute to the spread of hacked information if it is offered to them in the future, and possibly doing so in a distorted form. The role of *Resett* in the scandal involving the previous leader of Venstre shows that they at least have the potential to play such a role.

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