D3.1. – FIMI Narrative Report: *An Analysis of Current State and Evolution of Russian Disinformation Narratives Targeting EU*

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Table of contents

List of acronyms

Abbr.	Meaning	Description
AI	Artificial Intelligence	Multiple technologies allowing generation, classification, and execution of human-like creative tasks.
CEDMO	Central European Digital Media Observatory	An independent non-partisan multidisciplinary hub of EDMO, aims to identify, research and prioritise the most critical sources and causes of information disorders in Central Europe (mainly the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland).
CAST	Center for Strategy and Technology Analysis	Russian think-tank.
CENESS	Center for Energy and Security Research (CENESS).	Russian think-tank.
CIB	Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour	Deliberate coordinated deceptive efforts by groups or networks to mislead or manipulate public discourse by using fake or misleading accounts, often across social media platforms.
CSR	Center for Strategic Research	Russian think-tank.
DIMI	Domestic Information Manipulation and Interference	Deliberate attempts to mislead or deceive the public within a country's borders, often with the aim of influencing public opinion, political processes, or social cohesion.
DISARM	Disinformation Analysis and Risk Management	An open-source framework designed for describing and understanding the behavioural parts of FIMI/disinformation. It sets out best practices for fighting disinformation through sharing data and analysis and informs effective action. The framework has been developed in line with global cybersecurity best practices.
EDMO	European Digital Media Observatory	Works to strengthen and enable collaboration among a multidisciplinary community of stakeholders tackling online disinformation. It brings together fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and academic researchers to understand

		and analyse disinformation, in collaboration with media organisations, online platforms and media literacy practitioners. EDMO can count on a network of 14 national or multinational Hubs active across 28 countries in the EU and EEA.
EEAS	European External Action Service	The diplomatic service and combined foreign and defence ministry of the European Union.
EU	European Union	A political and economic union of 27 European states.
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation	The primary federal domestic counter-intelligence and security agency for the U.S.
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference	Acts of manipulating or interfering with information by foreign entities aimed at undermining democratic processes and national security.
FSB	The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation	Russian counterintelligence agency, which Fifth Service (Operational Information and International Relations Service) is involved in hybrid activities (including information operations and sabotage) against EU member states, Moldova and Africa.
GONGO's	State-controlled, non-governmental organizations	A common term encompassing the 3 different types of actors.
GRU	The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation	Russian military intelligence agency which cyber-units (eg. 29155, 26165, 74455) are involved in FIMI operations targeting EU and NATO member states.
IM	Instrumentalization of migration	Migrants used as a tool by a state with limited strategic or political leverage to facilitate their movements across borders to destabilise or subjugate the foreign (target) state.
IRA	Internet Research Agency	Former Russian trolls' farm operated by Evgeni Prigozhin.
KGB	The State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus	Belarusian intelligence service.

MI	Migration of instrumentalisation	The strategic use of migration flows by states or non-state actors, including incitement and artificial generation of migratory movements combined with information operations, as a hybrid tool for political pressure and destabilization of target countries.
OSW	Center for Eastern Studies	Polish think tank.
PISM	Polish Institute of International Affairs	Polish think tank.
RISI	Russian Institute for Strategic Research	Russian think tank.
RIAC	Russian Council for International Affairs	Russian think tank.
RT	Russia Today	A Russian (dis)information TV and media outlet.
SAUFEX	Secure Automated Unified Framework for Exchange	A project financed by the European Union under HORIZON EUROPE and endorsed by various international bodies, aiming to advance the state-of-the-art in combating FIMI.
SDA	Social Design Agency	Russian state-controlled disinformation operators.
SVOP	Council for Foreign and Defense Policy	Russian think tank.
SVR	The Foreign Intelligence Service	Russian foreign intelligence service.
TTPs	Tactics, techniques, and procedures	A common terminology that describes an actor's behaviour, including its general goals (tactic), the methods used to achieve those tactical goals (technique), and the specific actions employed within a technique (procedure).

Introduction

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) has been considered by European Union and its member states a significant threat to internal cohesion, political stability, and the broader democratic order. The 2022 EU Strengthened *Code of Practice on Disinformation*, building upon prior declarations by EU institutions, asserts that: "The exposure of citizens to large-scale disinformation, including misleading or outright false information, is a major challenge for Europe. Our open democratic societies depend on public debates that allow well-informed citizens to express their will through free and fair political processes"[1]. This recognition of the threat is accompanied by a parallel commitment to safeguarding fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression, access to information, and the right to privacy. The document emphasizes the importance of maintaining a careful balance between protecting these rights and implementing effective measures to limit the dissemination and impact of disinformation—even when such content remains formally within the boundaries of legality.

This report was produced as part of the Work Package 3 (WP3): "Social Science and Humanities Research" within **Secure Automated Unified Framework for Exchange (SAUFEX)** project, funded from EU's Horizon Europe grant. The general objective of WP3 is to improve understanding of the narratives used in FIMI campaigns and their target groups. From a broader perspective, WP3 seeks to analyze the key actors involved in the dissemination of disinformation and to identify effective strategies and tools for enhancing responses to FIMI and other hybrid threats. Research performed within WP3 is a continuation of the work commenced by the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (ISP PAN) and the University of Warsaw (UW) initiated in the Work Package 1 (WP1): "Requirements Gathering and Analysis". While Reports *D1.1. – Towards FIMI Resilience Council in Poland. A Research and Progress Report*[2] and *D1.2 – The Current State of Detection and Response to FIMI* contained recommendations[3] for the EU and Member States on strengthening resilience to information manipulation and introducing more effective mechanisms for responding to FIMI incidents, the *D3.1. – FIMI Narrative Report: An Analysis of Current State and Evolution of Russian Disinformation Narratives Targeting EU* focuses on analysing the evolution of narratives, as well as the techniques, tactics and procedures (TTPs) used by threat actors. The aforementioned Report contains research results offering inferences, observations and other relevant ideas seeking to address problems in question.

The social science and humanities research undertaken in WP3 aims to provide qualitative insights into FIMI campaigns that complement WP2 and WP4's technical analysis. By monitoring real-world FIMI campaigns in 2024, WP3 generated data to support WP4's AI tools

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[1] *Strengthened code of practice on disinformation*, European Commission 2022, https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c1c55f26-063e-11ed-acce-01aa75ed71a1/language-en [last access 17. 12. 2024].

[2] T. Chłoń, R. Kupiecki, *Towards FIMI Resilience Council in Poland. A Research and Progress Report*, SAUFEX, 2024, https://docs.saufex.eu/Towards_FIMI_Resilience_Council_in_Poland.pdf [last access: 22.07.2025].

[3] F. Bryjka, T. Chłoń, A. Cianciara, K. Golik, P. Kasprzyk, R. Kupiecki, A. Legucka, S. Nowacka, P.Sosnowski, K, Szymańska, *The current state of detection and response to FIMI*, December 2024, https://docs.saufex.eu/D1.2%20-%20Current%20state%20of%20detection%20and%20response%20to%20FIMI.pdf [last access: 22.07.2025].

and incorporate evolving TTPs into them. WP3 also evaluates new tools and frameworks from WP2 to improve them via feedback integrating social science and technical expertise across partners.

Structure and contents of the Report

This Report presents an in-depth, multi-layered investigation into Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), with a particular focus on the Russian Federation as a systemic malign actor in the field of hybrid threats. Building on a conceptual and methodological foundation rooted in narrative analysis, the study examines the evolution, structure, content, and impact of disinformation narratives as instruments of statecraft and asymmetric power projection. The overarching goal is to understand the mechanisms through which FIMI undermines democratic cohesion, distorts public discourse, and weakens institutional resilience in the European Union and its neighborhood.

Part I of the Report lays the conceptual groundwork by elaborating a typology of disinformation narratives, distinguishing among identity, systemic, and problem narratives. These categories serve to classify the strategic intentions and targeted effects of information operations. A dedicated section explores the analytical dimensions of strategic objectives embedded in narrative construction. The methodology is based on narrative analysis, supported by structured data collection and classification. The section also details the sources of empirical data used throughout the report.

Part II focuses on the Russian Federation as a persistent and well-resourced systemic FIMI actor. It identifies the strategic and tactical objectives driving Russia's disinformation efforts, especially within the context of its broader geopolitical aims in Eastern Europe and the EU. The Report explores the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that define Russian information warfare, including the blending of covert state-sponsored campaigns with quasi-independent proxy actors and media ecosystems. This section highlights the integrated architecture, adaptive and decentralized nature of Russia's FIMI operations, showing how they exploit multiple technological platforms, societal vulnerabilities, and legal gray zones to maximize disruption.

Part III dissects Russian disinformation narratives related to the full-scale 2022 agression against Ukraine. It introduces a hierarchical model of narrative structure, starting with a metanarrative of Russian civilizational exceptionalism and moral order. Beneath this layer, systemic, identity-based, and situational (problem) narratives are unpacked (as thematic content of matanarrative). The section includes a focused case study on the narrative claiming that Ukraine lacks historical legitimacy as an independent state and is inherently a part of Russian civilization. This analysis reveals the strategic use of historical revisionism and emotional appeals to justify military aggression and delegitimize Ukrainian sovereignty. It also explores how such narratives are tailored for domestic, regional, and international audiences.

Part IV of the Report expands the analytical lens to explore the instrumentalisation of migration as a tool of hybrid warfare, with particular emphasis on the ongoing (weaponised migration) crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border. The section introduces the concept of the "dual-track strategy" in FIMI operations, wherein multiple audience segments – such as security-oriented anti-immigration groups and humanitarian-minded pro-migration advocates – are simultaneously targeted with customized/tailored disinformation. A detailed discourse analysis outlines the mechanisms through which such narratives are disseminated and received. The case

of the Egor Putilov affair is presented as an illustrative example of dual-track dissemination. Additionally, this part of the report provides an empirical reconstruction of the hybrid campaign associated with the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, including narrative mapping, audience segmentation, impact assessment, and systemic implications for European border and migration policies. The section concludes with actionable recommendations for EU-level countermeasures and strategic communication.

Part V addresses FIMI in the context of electoral integrity, with a specific focus on the 2024 European Parliament elections. It begins by outlining the risks that foreign disinformation poses to democratic processes, including voter manipulation, trust erosion, and polarization. Drawing from cross-national case studies, the section presents key FIMI narratives identified during the 2024 campaign in nine EU member states: France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. These examples illustrate the thematic diversity and national tailoring of disinformation campaigns, which often exploit local grievances, historical memory, and political cleavages. A comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2024 elections assesses continuity and change in FIMI strategies, supported by both qualitative and quantitative evaluations. One featured case study focuses on the persistence and adaptation of election fraud narratives, offering insights into how disinformation themes evolve and re-emerge across electoral cycles.

The **Summary section** consolidates key findings across all thematic areas and underscores the need for a cohesive, cross-sectoral EU strategy to detect, deter, and counter FIMI activities. It emphasizes the necessity of balancing counter-disinformation efforts with fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression and access to information. The report also stresses the value of improved data access, multi-actor collaboration (including public-private partnerships), and enhanced digital literacy as foundational components of societal resilience.

A series of **Appendices** detail the technical and methodological tools used throughout the study, including prompt design for large language model (LLM)-supported analysis, criteria for narrative classification, and verification methods. These resources aim to support transparency, reproducibility, and further research in this evolving domain.

Taken as a whole, this Report contributes to a growing body of evidence that characterizes FIMI as a complex, adaptive, and increasingly transnational threat. It demonstrates the strategic function of narrative warfare in shaping perception, influencing behavior, and undermining adversaries below the threshold of armed conflict. By combining conceptual clarity with empirical rigor, the Report provides both a theoretical framework and practical insights for policymakers, researchers, and security practitioners engaged in the defense of democratic information ecosystems and resilience building. The authors view the utility of this study on multiple levels.

The report's conceptual and methodological clarity makes it a foundational document for those seeking to understand the structural and strategic dimensions of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), particularly as executed by the Russian Federation. By organizing disinformation into identity, systemic, and problem narratives, and integrating this typology with a rigorous narrative analysis methodology, the report equips scholars with a precise terminology and analytical toolkit for examining how disinformation operates as a form of hybrid threat.

For policymakers, the study offers grounded insights into the mechanisms through which FIMI undermines democratic cohesion, public trust, and institutional resilience within the EU and its neighborhood. Such insights are essential for crafting informed, proportionate, and rights-respecting countermeasures. Notably, the Report linking high-level strategic objectives with specific case studies, such as Russia's narrative warfare against Ukraine and the weaponization of migration at the Polish-Belarusian border – illustrates the real-world consequences of FIMI tactics and enhances its relevance for security practitioners.

These professionals will find value in the detailed discussion of Russian TTPs (tactics, techniques, and procedures), the architecture of its disinformation ecosystems, and the empirically grounded recommendations for detection, mitigation, and response. Meanwhile, the section on electoral interference during the 2024 European Parliament elections broadens the scope of the analysis to include the integrity of democratic processes, offering a comparative and data-driven perspective essential for electoral commissions and civic organizations.

Finally, the inclusion of appendices on prompt engineering for LLMs, narrative classification, and verification methods reflects a commitment to transparency, reproducibility, and technological adaptability, positioning the report as a methodological reference for future research and operational applications.

In sum, the authors of the Report wish to see its role, not only as a contribution to academic scholarship, but also a practical guide for shaping resilient infospace, truth-based information policy and strategic communication in a „hybrid age".

Part I

Concepts, methods and data

1.1. Conceptual framework: disinformation narratives and narrative levels

Narratives are essentially about storytelling. They are central to how humans make sense of the world and build individual and collectives hierarchies of the facts, inveolvind their significance. Thus, they are central to identity formation. Narratives go beyond simple facts, events and phenomena, truth and lies. They structure imagination and experiences and provide meaning, guiding interpretation, thus helping shape and sustain social and political identities, They, in turn, serve as interpretive lenses that individuals use also to assess political issues. In doing so, they influence attitudes, behaviours, and political choices[4].

Thus narratives are more than stories. Not only do they report and interpret past events, but they also provide a normative vision of the future. They constitute a combination of selective historical accounts of what happened and normative visions of a political project that serves the goals of the narrative entrepreneur[5]. Thus narratives construct meaning of the past, present and future[6]. They focus on a sequence of events where an aspect of the status quo is breached as a result of an impetus, which could be a problem, and there is progress to a new point of status quo, or a restoration of equilibrium[7].

FIMI narratives can be conceptualized as thematic frameworks promoted by foreign actors and their local partners, often grounded in natural or deliberately fabricated historical myths[8]. These narratives aim to deceive and influence public opinion by legitimizing or delegitimizing ideologies and individuals through emotional and socially relevant appeals that spread across various media and platforms. They are powerful because they play their part in establishing affective communities. When challenged, individuals may react emotionally to preserve their positive social identities, making corrections less effective. Research shows that corrective information (fact-checking) that contradicts established beliefs can lead to resistance and reinforce misperceptions. In contrast, offering alternative factual narratives, consistent with people's worldviews, may be more successful in addressing disinformation[9].

Disinformation narratives can be particularly effective in times of crisis, instability and uncertainty. Accordingly, crises are points where 'meanings have become indeterminate',

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[4] J. Suau Martínez, C. Juarez Miro, *Understanding Disinformation as Narratives in the Hybrid Media Ecosystem: Evidence From the US,"* Journalism", 2024, https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241303249.

[5] A.K. Cianciara, *Between EU's Aspiring Saint and Disillusioned Rebel: Hegemonic Narrative and Counter-Narrative Production in Poland*, „Journal of Contemporary European Studies", 2022, 30(1), p. 84-96. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1877121.

[6] A. Miskimmon, B. Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Introduction* in: A. Miskimmon et al. (eds.), *Forging the World Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, University of Michigan Press, 2017, p. 1-22.

[7] M. Hellman, *Security, Disinformation, and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-58747-4, p. 101.

[8] R. Kupiecki, *Western Betrayal, The Founding Myth of Russian Foreign Policy*, in: A. Legucka, R. Kupiecki R., (eds.), „Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus", Routledge, London 2022, DOI: 10.4324/9781003281597.

[9] J. Suau Martínez, C. Juarez Miro, *Understanding Disinformation as Narratives…*.op.cit.

allowing political actors to 'attempt to impose fixed meanings on social experience'[10]. Narratives may serve as instruments of legitimization or de-legitimization strategies, fostering processes of justification or contestation of a polity, policy or individual action[11].

Some narratives, typically state-supported narratives, are deemed 'strategic'. The term 'strategic' assumes an understanding of intent, meaning that there is determination and an objective (strategic usage) behind the narrative. The term does not indicate that the intent is either malicious or benign, but only that the narrative has direction and purpose. Accordingly, they are defined as 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'[12]. In the context of Russian disinformation/FIMI, strategic narratives refer to stories being told to achieve political influence over target countries, and they do have a malicious intent, aimed at destabilizing the targeted countries.

1.1.1 Analysis of strategic objectives in narratives

The academic literature highlights distinctions among various types of narratives and establishes a hierarchical structure within them[13]. The systematic classification of narratives enhances comprehension of both communication sources and the strategic objectives pursued by different international actors in domestic and foreign policy. The different levels of constructed narratives are often interdependent, intersecting or belonging to multiple categorical classifications. One method of classifying narratives employs a three-tiered framework: 1) metanarratives, 2) narratives, and 3) messages[14]. While metanarratives do not necessarily serve a disinformation function, they often represent cultural constructs or ideological frameworks closely aligned with societal beliefs.

A metanarrative, also referred to as a master narrative or grand narrative, constitutes a dominant, overarching framework that provides context and meaning to subordinate narratives. The prefix 'meta' signifies an overarching perspective, referring to narratives that explain or structure other, smaller narratives. According to Lyotard, metanarratives function as legitimating discourses that justify political systems, scientific paradigms, and social structures[15]. His analysis demonstrates the continued influence of metanarratives in shaping global politics and ideology. Several major metanarratives have emerged in the post-Cold War era. One example is Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, which asserts the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy[16]. Another is Russian exceptionalism, as theorized by Alexander

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[10] S. Maza, *Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History*, „The American Historical Review", 1996, No. 101 (5), p. 1493–1515.

[11] A.K. Cianciara, *The Politics of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Routledge, London & New York 2020, p. 29.

[12] A. Miskimmon, B. Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Introduction*…op. cit.

[13] A. Miskimmon, B. Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Routledge; Halverson 2013; J.H. Goodall, S. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, Palgrave McMillan, New York 2011, p. 11–14.

[14] L. Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*. Routledge, 2006.

[15] J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

[16] F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press 1992.

Dugin, which serves as a metanarrative offering overarching interpretations of historical developments and justifying political actions[17].

Grand narratives attribute meaning to historical processes by linking them to a final objective or universal truth. Metanarratives are transhistorical constructs deeply embedded within a given culture[18]. Their effectiveness relies on cultural integration through sustained, long-term repetition and dissemination. While all metanarratives qualify as narratives, not all narratives achieve the status of metanarratives. Unlike narratives, which are adaptable to evolving circumstances and the sender's needs, metanarratives exhibit greater longevity and deeper cultural entrenchment.

The hierarchical structuring of narratives – particularly the distinction between metanarratives, narratives, and messages – sheds light on the mechanisms through which political and ideological discourses are shaped and perpetuated. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for analysing the role of narratives in global politics, policy-making, and cultural identity formation.

When analysing metanarratives, it is essential to consider the following questions:

- Does the metanarrative stem from the state or national identity of the international actor?
- Is this metanarrative superior to other, less significant narratives, and is it internally coherent?
- Is it culturally conditioned?

1.1.2. Typology: identity, systemic and problem narratives

A narrative, in contrast, is a cohesive system of interconnected and sequentially structured stories that share common rhetorical objectives. Narratives function as baseline stories for a target audience. The primary role of narrative is persuasion. Narratives rely on micro-stories, which serve as evidence to enhance their credibility and effectiveness, helping to achieve intended goals. Additionally, narratives shape audience perception by tailoring messages accordingly. In some cases, narratives obscure actor's immediate objectives, maintaining consistency in purpose rather than in content[19].

Three primary types of narratives can be distinguished: identity, systemic and problem narratives.

Identity narratives, which sometimes intersect with metanarratives, address questions regarding international actor's behaviour and value system. For example, Russian identity narratives emphasize Russia as a distinct civilization with a historical mission. These narratives tell the story of an actor's heritage, values, and objectives. They frequently incorporate an element of moral struggle between good and evil. One of the foundational classic studies in propaganda, conducted by Lasswell[20], metaphorically described how the 'satanization' of the enemy

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[17] A. Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, Arktos, 2012, https://www.maieutiek.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Fourth-Political-Theory.pdf [last access: 30.05.2025].

[18] J. Halverson, H. Goodall, S. Corman, *Master Narratives…,* op. cit.

[19] A. Legucka, R. Kupiecki *Introduction*, in: A. Legucka, R. Kupiecki (eds.), „Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus", Routledge 2022.

[20] H.D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1927.

constructs an adversarial simulacrum so deeply entrenched in absolute and irrational evil that it justifies all efforts to eliminate it[21].

By contrast, systemic narratives address broader issues related to the structure of the international order. They reveal state's strategic objectives, its vision of the future, and the changes it seeks to achieve with regard to the future of the international order. They typically answer the following questions:

- How is the international order structured?
- Within this order, who is considered good, and who is considered evil?
- Is the international order just or unjust, and why?
- Who governs the world?

Finally, problem narratives refer to specific policies and political events. They define the conflict that needs to be resolved and propose ways to resolve it. When analysing problem narratives, it is essential to consider the following questions:

- What specific events or issues does the narrative emphasize?
- Who are the key actors, and how are they portrayed?
- What rhetorical or ideological purpose does the narrative serve?
- What emotions does the narrative attempt to evoke in its audience?
- Does the narrative reinforce existing beliefs, or does it seek to challenge and reshape perceptions?

Table 1. The typology of narratives

Metanarrative: The world is divided, Russia is unique, and special (Russian messianism and the myth of Russian exceptionalism); Russian Civilization.		
Identity Narratives	**Systemic Narratives**	**Problem Narratives**
Russia's mission in the world, the fight between good and evil; Orthodox Russia vs. Satanic West.	The current order based on Pax Americana is unjust and illegitimate; the USA aims to destroy Russia; Russia is an empire and entitled to its own sphere of influence.	Russia's war is a defensive war; NATO is an offensive alliance; Ukraine is anti-Russia; Europe is in decay and provokes Ukraine; Europe will freeze without gas for the sake of American interests.

Source: *own study*

As to messages they can be understood as micro-narratives, functioning as specific sequences of interrelated past events recalled for rhetorical or ideological purposes. They include a set of

[21] M. De Luca, G. Luigi, *Conspiratorial Narratives and Ideological Constructs in the Russia–Ukraine Conflict: From the New World Order to the Golden Billion Theories*, „Genealogy", 2024, no. 8(4) p. 131. doi:10.3390/genealogy8040131.

elements – actors, events, and objects – linked through occurrences. Messages do not necessarily aim to persuade anyone; rather, they often function as statements that do not require evidence. However, they must remain compatible with narratives and metanarratives. Messages address specific problems, but do not always exhibit internal consistency, unlike narratives, which maintain coherence in their overarching purpose. Despite this, messages serve a crucial role in reinforcing the ideological or rhetorical objectives of strategic communication. Messages are not merely a means of transmitting information but a mechanism for constructing reality. The way a story is told and framed determines its reception and acceptance.

Narratives are framed to target particular audiences. These audiences are not passive consumers of content; rather, they actively interpret narratives, filtering them through their own experiences, emotions, and cultural contexts. As a result, the effectiveness of a strategic narratives depends not only on their content, but also on their alignment with the audience's pre-existing worldviews. If a narrative reinforces existing beliefs, it is more likely to be persuasive. Conversely, narratives that challenge established views may encounter resistance, or lead to a more critical analysis[22].

A crucial element in the process of narrative reception is the role of affect, or emotional engagement. Emotions can enhance the effectiveness of persuasion, by encouraging audiences to accept a narrative as a truthful representation of reality without scrutinizing details. However, emotions can also provoke scepticism, as strong emotional reactions may lead individuals to assess the credibility of the narrative, and question its intentions. Affect thus plays a dual role: it can amplify narrative's impact or provoke its rejection[23].

Thus the content of the narratives should be seen in the wider context of how they are received, reinterpreted, or rejected by various audiences. In geopolitical contexts, where competing narratives vie for influence, studying narratives reveals the mechanisms that shape opinions, identities, and political attitudes[24].

1.2. Methodology: narrative analysis

Narrative analysis allows exploring narrative content and structure. Following a structuralist approach by Shanahan et al., it is argued here that narratives consist of identifiable components that can be studied empirically and generalized across space and time[25]. But what is the added value of studying the structure of disinformation narratives? First, it should be underlined that existing studies of disinformation/FIMI typically trace the flow and amplification of topics across the media, but what they lack is the analysis of how topics take on meaning through the connectivity of their constituent parts and through storytelling structures. There is thus a tendency to overlook critical elements of how disinformation might resonate with key groups or invite identification with audiences[26].

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[22] A. Miskimmon, B. Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives…*op. cit.

[23] J. Szostek, *The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine: The Role of Linkage*, „Perspectives on Politics", 2017, No. 15(2), p. 379-395. doi:10.1017/S153759271700007X.

[24] A. Miskimmon, B. Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives…*op. cit.; J. Szostek, *The Power…*op.cit.

[25] E.A. Shanahan, M.D. Jones, M.K. McBeth, C.M. Radaelli, *The Narrative Policy Framework*, In: C.M. Weible, P.A. Sabatier (eds.), „The Theories of the Policy Process", CO: Westview Press, 2018, p. 173–213.

[26] M. Hellman, *Security, Disinformation, and Harmful Narratives…*op. cit., p. 103.

Moreover, analysis of narrative structure aims at exposing the harmful capacity of (some of) strategic, state-supported narratives. The analysis seeks to identify not only what is being said, but rather how the story is told and what harm this can inflict[27].

Thus the underlying idea behind undertaking a narrative analysis is that meaning is constructed through narratives and that an analysis of narratives can extract these meanings and expose them. The way in which the story is told is key to learning about how messages are produced. Tracing meaning-making is possible through temporal and spatial aspects, and the way the components are linked. Accordingly, the aim of the analysis is to deconstruct and define the basic structure of the narrative

The key questions to be asked when undertaking the narrative analysis are thus the following: how is the story told? What is the logic of the narrative? How are individual narrative components linked in time and space? Ultimately, the goal of the narrative analysis is to deconstruct and expose practices of meaning production, which in the case of FIMI narratives, can inflict serious harm on open societies in democratic political systems.

The following research design that guides the empirical analysis conducted in the present report draws on and complements methodological frameworks previously used to analyse both policy narratives[28] and disinformation narratives[29].

Narratives are systems that involve actors, events, locations, and temporality, and that cohere within a structure of conflict desire, action, and resolution. Through the relationships between the constituent stories and their structures, narratives embody specific values and provide cognitive templates. Importantly, narratives are relationally constructed in that they take on meaning and have impact when they interact with and relate to other narratives, or are connected to personal and collective identities[30].

Based on existing literature, we identify three major components that we consider particularly useful for the study of Russian FIMI. These include characters, plot and moral of the story.

A character (or actor) may be an individual person, leader, institution, organization, state, or government represented as having an active role in the story and participating in the unfolding events. Actors may play different roles, especially those of a victim, villain, hero, but also of allies or opponents. Victims are those who are harmed, villains are those who do the harm, whereas heroes are those who provide or promise to provide relief from the harm and presume to solve the problem. More nuanced character types, such as allies, opponents or fools can also be part of the narrative, as those who assist the hero or the villain. Those who assist the villain may be doing this out of malicious motives, but also because they are fools: too weak or too blind to see the real nature of the good versus evil struggle.

Thus when seeking to identify the characters of the narrative we should be asking the following questions:

- Who are the villains? i.e. who are the characters that cause the problem?

[27] C. Wagnsson, C. Barzanje, *A Framework for Analysing Antagonistic Narrative Strategies: A Russian Tale of Swedish Decline*, „Media, War & Conflict", 2021, No. 14(2), p. 239-257. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635219884343.

[28] E.A. Shanahan, M.D. Jones, M.K. McBeth, C.M. Radaelli, *The Narrative Policy Framework*…op. cit.

[29] M. Hellman, *Security, Disinformation, and Harmful Narratives*…op. cit.; C. Wagnsson, C. Barzanje, *A framework for analysing antagonistic narrative strategies*…op. cit.

[30] M. Hellman, *Security, Disinformation, and Harmful Narratives*…op. cit.; C. Archetti. *The Unbearable Thinness of Strategic Communication*, In: C. Bjola, J. Pamment (eds.), „Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism. The Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy", Routledge, 2018, p. 81-95.

- Who are the heroes? i.e. who are the characters that fix the problem?
- Who are the victims? i.e. who are the characters that suffer from the problem caused by the villains?
- Who are the allies?, i.e. who are the characters who help the heroes?
- Who are the opponents?, i.e. who are the characters who support the villains?
- Who are the fools? i.e. characters that do not know how to solve the problem, or disturb the efforts to solve the problem, or are too naïve to see the problem, its causes and consequences, namely who are the so-called "useful idiots"?

Whereas not all these characters will necessarily be present in each narrative, one may expect the presence of at least the villain and the hero, as well as the victim – in most cases.

As to the plot it links the characters and the setting, while organizing the action. It situates the characters and their relationship in time and space. The plot provides the arc of action where events interact with actions of the characters. The plot would also typically identify the problem, and then assign responsibility, blame and shame for the problem – to villains, opponents and fools.

When seeking to identify the plot of the narrative we should be asking the following questions:

- What is the problem that the narrative identifies? For instance, is the problem about inequality? Injustice? Treason?
- What led to the problem, according to the narrative? Was it for instance because of (unprovoked) aggression of the villain's and his allies? Or maybe their moral corruption or weakness?
- In terms of temporality, is the narrative past-oriented or future-oriented? Does the narrative place the problem in the past, present or future?

Finally, the moral is typically equivalent to a solution to the problem and may culminate in a call to action[31]. Similarly to the problem, the solution can be placed in the past or in the future. As to the former, the solution may be narrated as a call to return to old values and traditions, and to restore society to what it once was (restoration of the original status quo). As to the latter, the desired end-result may be placed in the future, formulating a call to establish a brand new world or social order.

Accordingly, when seeking to identify the moral of the narrative we should be asking the following questions:

- What is the proposed solution, according to the narrative?
- How should the desired end-result be achieved? In other words, what is the struggle about: the good against the evil, the (morally) strong against the weak, or the righteous ones against the decadent, etc.

It should be underlined that not all the above-mentioned components may be equally present and developed within each narrative. In connection with the above-described analysis of the narrative levels (meta-narratives, narratives, messages) our hypothesis – to be verified in the empirical studies – is that the characters component should be predominantly the focus of narratives, whereas the metanarratives should mostly highlight the moral of the story. Finally, messages should mostly relate to the plot: events and problems to be addressed.

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[31] E.A. Shanahan, M.D. Jones, M.K. McBeth, C.M. Radaelli, *The Narrative Policy Framework*…op. cit.. p. 176.

1.3. Data

Empirically, this report relies on six thematic datasets that the Debunk.org team developed from Exa.ai and refined them with ChatGPT. The compilation of the datasets focused specifically on identifying examples of FIMI narratives tied to predefined themes. The aim was not to retrieve all content broadly related to foreign disinformation, but to isolate materials where distinct FIMI messages were detectable. Both topical relevance and the presence of narrative content were mandatory for inclusion into datasets.

Since the notion of FIMI only entered common usage around 2021 and some of the searches went back to 2018, the term was supplemented with alternative keywords, such as "foreign disinformation," "foreign information operations" or "foreign election meddling" – to ensure comprehensive coverage of all relevant content. Debunk.org ran parallel retrievals targeting both online articles and reports (e.g., scientific research papers and think-tank analyses) using these expanded criteria. The articles often surfaced FIMI observables, while the reports provided deeper context on FIMI incidents or campaigns.

For two of the six thematic datasets (those covering the European Parliament elections of 2019 and 2024), Debunk.org implemented a multilingual content retrieval strategy, explicitly requesting results published in ten selected EU languages[32], enabling coverage of geographically and linguistically diverse sources. For the other thematic areas, while the resulting publications featured multiple languages, their representation was naturally more limited in the absence of explicit language targeting.

Table 2. The results from Debunk search with the use of AI tools

No.	Thematic Datasets	Timeframe	Language Targeting	Number of Publications
1	European Parliament (EP) election, 2019	1 January 2019 – 31 December 2019	Yes	68
2	European Parliament (EP) election, 2024	1 January 2024 – 31 December 2024	Yes	162
3	Weaponised migration crisis on the EU–Belarus border	1 January 2021 – 31 December 2024	No	89
4	Full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine	24 February 2022 – 31 December 2024	No	674
5	Ukrainian refugees	24 February 2022 – 31 December 2024	No	238
6	Ukraine peace negotiations	24 February 2022 – 28 February 2025	No	23

Source: *Debunk dataset*

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[32] The ten languages included: Bulgarian, Dutch, German, French, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak, Spanish, and Swedish.

The thematic datasets were created in a three-phase procedure: 1) Dataset Retrieval with Exa.ai: Prompt-Driven Search; 2) Relevancy Verification and Micro-Narrative Extraction with ChatGPT; 3) Narrative Classification and Validation.

The Exa.ai workflow relied on composite, criteria-driven prompts that the system itself parsed into optimal search terms. The first step in this process unfolded as crafting high-level prompts. After running the initial prompt, analysts reviewed a random sample of 20-40 results. Based on that feedback, prompts were fine-tuned – adjusting phrasing, keyword weights, and/or Boolean logic – until the sample precision stabilised at 60–80%. Then a three-stage verification process combining automated and manual components was executed. The workflow included: (1) relevance confirmation, (2) narrative extraction, and (3) human analyst review. Publications that failed to meet both conditions (designated theme and at least one clearly identifiable disinformation/ FIMI narrative) were excluded from further analysis. If fewer than 90% of a sample met both criteria, this indicated prompt underperformance and triggered refinement. Finally, in order to translate the extracted narratives into a structured taxonomy (see Appendix 4 for the list of uniform narrative and messages categories), Debunk.org analysts implemented a three-stage classification and validation protocol: uniform narrative generation, analyst refinement, and final validation.

Chart 1. Full-Lifecycle Process for Compiling Six Thematic Datasets
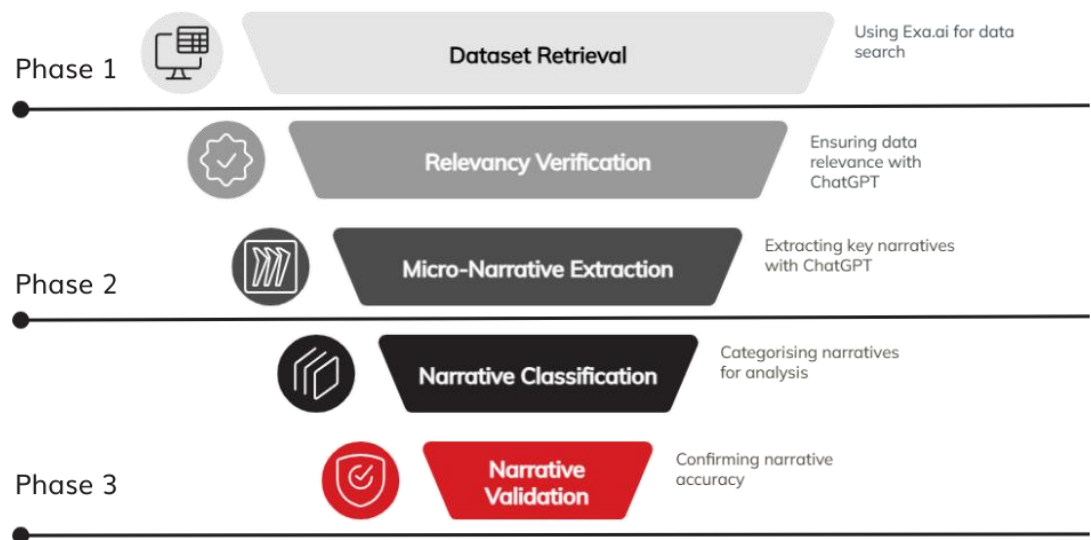
Source: *Debunk study*

Part II

Russia as a systemic FIMI threat actor

Russia's FIMI strategy is multifaceted and deeply embedded in its broader geopolitical agenda[33]. It extends far beyond historical revisionism into political, social, cultural, and military domains. The ultimate aim is to preserve the current regime, reassert Russia's influence, and reshape the global order to favor authoritarian power structures. Russia's FIMI goals are used to sow confusion, distrust, and division, both domestically and internationally.

A key objective of Russia's disinformation is to challenge the unipolar, Western-dominated world order established after the Cold War. The Kremlin positions itself as a key player in a multipolar system, using information warfare to undermine the credibility of the United States and its allies. By discrediting liberal democracies and spreading skepticism about Western leadership, Russia seeks to present itself as a legitimate global alternative.

Disinformation also serves to justify Russia's foreign policy and military actions. By invoking selective historical narratives and emotionally charged symbolism, the Kremlin frames its aggression as morally and legally justified[34]. For instance, portraying Ukrainians as 'fascists' or presenting military interventions as humanitarian missions helps Russia legitimize its actions and gain domestic support, while simultaneously undermining the sovereignty of neighboring countries.

Domestically, disinformation strengthens political control by fostering a sense of national unity based on pride, victimhood, and loyalty to the state and Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin promotes the image of Russia as a 'besieged fortress', threatened by hostile external forces. This narrative supports the view that only strong, centralized leadership – personified by Vladimir Putin – can protect Russia's heritage and future. Opposition voices are thus framed as threats to national security and unity.

Russia's disinformation campaigns also target Western societies to weaken democratic institutions and alliances such as NATO and the EU. By exploiting political polarization, social tensions, and ideological divides, the Kremlin attempts to destabilize democratic systems from within. Russian narratives portray countries that expose Russia's negative behavior as irrational or driven by historical bias (as a 'Russofobic'), seeking to marginalize their role in shaping European policy and to fracture Western unity[35].

Historical memory is tightly controlled as part of Russia's disinformation strategy[36]. The Kremlin has enacted laws that suppress alternative interpretations of Soviet history, especially

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[33] A. Legucka, *History as a Tool of Russian Disinformation: Targeting Poland*, in: R. Kupiecki, A. Legucka (ed.), „Disinformation and the Resilience of Democratic Societies", The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw 2023, p. 69-76.
[34] K. Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West?,* Brookings Institution Press, Chatham House, 2019, p. 117–120.
[35] J. Darczewska, P. Żochowski, *Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy: A Weapon of Mass Destruction*, OSW (Centre for Eastern Studies), Warsaw, October 2025, p. 13–16.
[36] A. Legucka, *History as a Tool of Russian Disinformation…, op. cit.,* p. 73.

regarding World War II and Stalin-era crimes. These legal measures enforce a singular, state-approved version of history, fostering a national identity rooted in heroism and sacrifice. This mythologized narrative not only legitimizes the current regime but also protects it from internal critique.

Finally, Russia *exports* disinformation globally to deepen divisions in foreign societies. By amplifying conspiracy theories, supporting fringe movements, and manipulating discourse on issues like health, migration, or civil rights, it erodes trust in institutions and weakens the social fabric of democratic states. This broad-spectrum approach reflects the Kremlin's commitment to using information warfare as a central pillar of its power projection in the 21st century.

Russia is a systemic threat actor conducting FIMI campaigns targeting EU member states within its hybrid warfare strategy. Weaponisation or militarisation of information is deeply rooted in Russian history, mentality, and strategic culture. Even the word 'disinformation' was invented by the Soviet secret services in the interwar period. Their own practices of information manipulation were given a foreign sound, suggesting in this respect an external origin. Based on a solid tsarist tradition, Moscow has long had a tradition of using disinformation as a weapon against its domestic and foreign enemies. Their impact, power, and popularity grew with the development of technological tools and knowledge about individual and group cognitive processes[37].

Such a strategic approach has been developed during the 'Cold War' era within 'active measures' counter-intelligence doctrine. The historical term 'active measures' – now transferred into 'support measures' – covers a wide range of offensive operational techniques involving the use of disinformation, subversion, and sabotage to weaken Western countries and impose the Kremlin's political will on them. Although it originates from Soviet KGB terminology, it is now used in its new and more technologically advanced form by the Russian intelligence services: Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU)[38].

Using 'active measures', the Kremlin can conduct influence operations targeting decision-makers and societies within the European Union. Through information manipulations and interference is trying to spread a malign impact on European politics, economy, security, military, culture, values, and education. One of the theoretical foundations of this method is the concept of 'reflective control' developed by Vladimir Lefevre. It involves influencing the perception of a given entity (e.g. public opinion, selected social groups or decision-makers) regarding itself, its adversary, as well as all objects, issues and topics related to the conflict between the aggressor and the target of 'reflective control'. Its methods include creating false reasons for protest in the opponent's country, creating false goals for the opponent,

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[37] In some parts, the report uses excerpts previously prepared by the authors in a publication R. Kupiecki, F. Bryjka, T. Chłoń, *International Disinformation. A Handbook for Analysis and Response*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2025, DOI: 10.1163/9789004715769, p. 132-153, that was also produced as part of the SAUFEX project.

[38] J. Darczewska, P. Żochowski, *Active measures. Russia's key export*, „Point of View", Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), no 64, May 2017, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/point-view/2017-05-30/active-measures-russias-key-export [last acces: 02.06.2025]; S. Hosaka, *Repeating History: Soviet Offensive Counterintelligence Active Measures*, „International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence", 35(3), 2020, https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1822100.

manipulating the opponent by promoting a false image of one's behaviour, or neutralising the opponent's cognitive abilities by providing a multitude of manipulated information[39].

The militarisation or weaponisation of information has been observed in official documents since 2000, when the first Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation was published. In its most recent 2021 Information Security Doctrine, Russia included information activities in its catalog of defensive and offensive military capabilities, pointing to the possibility of an outbreak of interstate conflict because of activities in cyberspace. In addition to this, Russia promotes the concept of 'sovereign internet' (RuNet) and aims to increase its influence in the field of global regulation of network development. The concept of a new generation of warfare (often referred to as hybrid war, non-linear war, or Gerasimov's doctrine) proves Russia's attribution of the strategic role of weaponization of information.

The chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, observed that war is now conducted by a roughly 4:1 ratio of nonmilitary and military measures. In his views, these non-military measures of warfare include economic sanctions, disruption of diplomatic ties, and political and diplomatic pressure. The Russians see information operations as a critical part of non-military measures. They have adapted from well-established Soviet techniques of subversion and destabilization for the age of the Internet and social media[40]. Russia, in contrast to many other states, does not treat information as a peripheral or supporting function but as a central pillar of statecraft, enabling it to project power, manipulate perceptions and disrupt adversaries conveniently below the threshold of open conflict[41].

In this particular context, Jolanta Darczewska, a Polish researcher from Center for Eastern Studies (OSW) rightly noted, that „a more detailed analysis of Russian Information Security Doctrines allows us to identify several general deepening trends in the country's security policy between 2000 and 2023. These boil down to the blurring of the boundaries between external and internal threats and between times of peace and war, the introduction of non-military methods and organisational structures into information warfare, and the ideological characterisation of the latter. Over time, this has led to a blurring of the contours of international conflicts, as evidenced by participation in a full-scale war against a neighbour in which it is 'not a party', as it is officially restoring order and saving the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine 'from genocide unleashed by the West"[42].

Darczewska's comment offers a nuanced and well-structured interpretation of evolving trends in Russian security policy by effectively linking doctrinal developments with real-world strategic behavior. It convincingly captures how the integration of non-military tools and ideological framing has contributed to a hybrid model of warfare that challenges traditional notions of conflict and sovereignty. The analysis is particularly insightful in illustrating the

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[39] For more, see: T.L. Thomas, *Russia's Reflexive ControT theory and the Military*, „Journal of Slavic Military Studies", 2004, no. 2, p. 237–256, DOI:10.1080/13518040 490450529; M. Wojnowski, *Zarządzanie refleksyjne jako paradygmat rosyjskich operacji informacyjno-psychologicznych w XXI w.*, „Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego", 2015, no. 12, p. 11–36.

[40] R. Kupiecki, F. Bryjka, T. Chłoń, *International...*op.cit., p. 136.

[41] J. Voo, V.V. Singh, *Russia's Information Confrontation Doctrine in Practice (2014–Present): Intent, Evolution and Implications*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2025, https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/06/russias-information-confrontation-doctrine-in-practice-2014present-intent-evolution-and-implications/ [last access: 30.06.2025], p. 8.

[42] J. Darczewska, *Zawładnąć umysłami i urządzić świat. Rosyjska strategia dywersji i dezinformacji*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, Warszawa 2024, p. 121.

discursive manipulation underpinning Russia's military engagement in Ukraine, highlighting the strategic utility of narrative warfare in obfuscating aggression.

2.1 Russian strategic and tactical objectives

The weaponised use of information is a tool to achieve Russia's strategic objectives, which in general can be explained as weakening the global position of Western democracies, the rules-based international order and advancing the global interests of the Kremlin. Russia's overarching goal is to cause a rift in transatlantic relations, reclaim its great power status, revisit the European security order, as well as to lead to the withdrawal of US military presence and commitment from the continent. This aspiration guides Russia's foreign, military, and information strategies aimed at reversing post-Cold War geopolitical setbacks and securing its position in a multipolar world order. The Kremlin conducts sustained disinformation and cyber operations to destabilise Western democracies. These operations aim to weaken trust in democratic institutions, erode international cohesion, and amplify societal divisions through targeted manipulation of perceptions and narratives[43].

In order to weaken internal cohesion and solidarity within the EU and NATO, Russia is conducting disinformation operations on key issues that provoke strong political emotions, such as providing assistance to Ukraine or integrating that country into the EU and NATO, irregular migration, the impact of sanctions imposed on Russia on the EU's economic condition, increased defence spending, etc. A constant element of Russia's FIMI is the undermining of Western values by weakening Euro-Atlantic civilisational ties, e.g. by undermining the authority of democratic institutions, the Western value system and way of life including criticism of liberalism and the promotion of ultra-conservatism and nationalism. Russia portrays itself as 'a guardian of decency and morality' or 'last bastion of traditional values' against a 'decadent West consumed by moral relativism, hypocrisy, LGBTQ+ rights and woke culture'.[44]

An empirical study based on comparative analysis of Russian disinformation attacks, conducted between 2015-2021, indicates that FIMI campaigns are most frequently launched when: (1) a country holds a national election in that year, and (2) that country is experiencing significant political unrest[45]. Russia's FIMI activities are aimed at supporting political circles that are Eurosceptic, anti-American and anti-Ukrainian. These circles are often nationalist and populist in nature. Although these are not always openly pro-Russian groups, they typically take a neutral or favourable stance from the Kremlin's perspective. By providing them with information support, Russia is building its support base, which is strengthened by various forms of (mostly informal) cooperation and funding.

These activities may take the form of corruption and espionage activities, as exemplified by the Voice of Europe (VoE), a media outlet financed since 2017 by Viktor Medvedchuk – a Ukrainian oligarch linked to Putin; and Artem Marchevsky – a former Ukrainian politician

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[43] J. Voo, V.V. Singh, *Russia's…*op.cit., p. 4.

[44] Ibidem., p. 13.

[45] B. Stewart, Sh. Jackson, J. Ishiyama, M.C. Marshall, *Explaining Russian State-Sponsored Disinformation Campaigns: Who Is Targeted and Why?*, „East European Politics", January 11, 2024, DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2024.2302597.

closely associated with Medvedchuk. The website provided a mix of short, neutral information on current events with articles containing manipulated or false themes in line with the Russian strategic narrative. This was to create the appearance of professionalism, objectivity, and reliability. Over its eight years of operation, the portal gained more than 180,000 followers on X (formerly Twitter).

To increase its social media outreach, sensational and emotional material was also published. The site was being published in 10 languages and used algorithms to artificially amplify manipulated content tailored to national political contexts. The VoE activities also involved corrupting politicians from EU countries (including Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, and Hungary) to spread Russian propaganda and lobby in line with Russian interests in exchange for financial benefits. This is referred to as an 'influence agent' - a person whose activities focus on shaping the local political debate and influencing decision-making processes in line with the expectations of a foreign actor. According to intelligence information made public by Czechia and Poland, politicians paid by 'Voice of Europe' were tasked with influencing the 2024 European elections[46]. Through pro-Russian MEPs, Russia can influence the political debate and shape decision-making processes, infiltrate EU institutions, and carry out classic espionage activities. An example of this is the case of a Latvian MEP Tatiana Ždanok, who had been working for the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) since 2004.[47]

2.2 Russia's FIMI operations

Russian FIMI campaigns are characterised by a high level of adaptability to national political dynamics, as well as countermeasures applied by the EU and its member states. Russian long-, mid- and short-term FIMI campaigns exploit specific local vulnerabilities in the political, social, cultural and regional contexts, with carefully tailored and targeted content, while maintaining overarching strategic goals. Russia operates globally, but the EU and Ukraine remain its major targets[48]. In the last two years, Russia launched a number of large scale FIMI operations such as „Doppelgänger", „False Façade" and „Portal Kombat" that have been identified by the 'defenders' community' and attributed to Russia.

Doppelgänger is a FIMI campaign active since mid-2022 and attributed to two Russia government-aligned companies Struktura and Social Design Agency (SDA). Its main objective was to expand Russian influence globally through audience segmentation and manipulative localised content. Initially focused on impersonating Western news outlets and government websites, the Doppelgänger has evolved into a complex, multi-layered operation. According to data collected by the European External Acton Service (EEAS), it consists of 228 domains and

[46] F. Bryjka, *Unravelling Russia's Network of Influence Agents in Europe*, „PISM Spotlight", No. 24, April 25, 2024, https://pism.pl/publications/unravelling-russias-network-of-influence-agents-in-europe [last access: 30.06.2025].

[47] R. Dobrokhotov, M. Weiss, Ch. Grozev, *Latvian Member of European Parliament is an Agent of Russian Intelligence, Leaked Emails Confirm*, „The Insider", Jannuary 29, 2024, ttps://theins.ru/en/politics/268694 [last access: 30.06.2025].

[48] *3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats Exposing the Architecture of FIMI Operations*, European External Action Service (EEAS), Brussels, March 2025, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/behind-the-curtain-a-novel-analytical-approach-to-fimi-exposure/ [last acess: 27.03.2025], p. 12, 26.

25,000 CIB (Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour) networks operating across nine languages: English, German, French, Spanish, Turkish, Polish, Arabic, Hebrew and Italian. It deployed networks of thousands of fake domains designed to manipulate platform algorithms, ran sponsored ads on Meta to drive traffic to its deceptive sites, and relied on large-scale CIB networks ensuring widespread distribution. It operated within a closed ecosystem, functioning as a self-contained cluster with no direct interactions with Russian state official or state-controlled sources. This insular structure suggests a hermetic operational model, reinforcing its autonomy within the broader FIMI landscape[49].

Currently, the operation is also using less elaborate methods of influence - a network of bot accounts operating on X, that shares links to both fake news and real content, yet presented in a manipulated manner. In June 2024, the Doppelgänger network published 1,366 pro-Russian posts on X in six languages (German, French, English, Italian, Polish and Ukrainian) reaching 4,66 million views. The content was aimed to discredit Western governments, criticise Ukraine and undermine Western support for Ukraine. Distributed meta-narratives were primarily:

- exploiting polarizing issues (54%);
- criticizing current governments (46,9%);
- against war in Ukraine (31,1%);
- undermining Western alliances (13,9%);
- against Ukraine (13,6%);
- support alternative governments (6%)[50].

Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) used within the above activities, as identified by the Counter Disinformation Network, included:

1) T0066: Degrade Adversary [Ukraine];
2) T0139.001: Discourage targeted countries from supporting Ukraine;
3) T0135.004: Polarise targeted countries;
4) T0136.006: Cultivate Support for [Russian] Allies;
5) T0004: Develop Competing Narratives – aimed at fuelling political polarisation;
6) T0083: Integrate Target Audience Vulnerabilities into Narrative – mostly focusing on polarising issues such as migration;
7) T0022.001: Amplify Existing Conspiracy Theory Narratives;
8) T0126.001: Call to Action to Attend;
9) T0085.003: Develop Inauthentic News Articles;
10) T0086.001: Develop Memes;
11) T0007: Create Inauthentic Social Media Pages and Groups;
12) T0090.004: Create Sockpuppet Accounts;
13) T0060: Continue to Amplify;
14) T0093: Acquire/Recruit Network;
15) T0145: Establish Account Imagery;
16) T0145.001: Copy Account Imagery;
17) T0145.005: Illustrated Character Account Imagery;
18) T0143.002: Fabricated Persona;

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[49] Ibidem., p. 24.

[50] L. Frühwirth, S. Nazari, *Fool Me Once: Russian Influence Operation Doppelganger Continious on X ad Facebook*, Counter Disinformation Network, September 3, 2024, p. 3, 7.

19) T0097.101: Local Persona;
20) T0098.002: Leverage Existing Inauthentic News Sites;
21) T0098.001: Create Inauthentic News Sites;
22) T0101: Create Localised Content;
23) T0018: Purchase Targeted Advertisements;
24) T0116.001: Post Inauthentic Social Media Comment;
25) T0049.004: Utilise Spamoflauge;
26) T0121.001: Bypass Content Blocking;
27) T0129.008: Redirect URLs;
28) T0129.004: Delete URLs;
29) T0130.002: Utilise Bulletproof Hosting;
30) T0129.001: Conceal Network Identity[51].

As indicated by Allience4Europe and Debunk.org, in the first half of 2025 the **Doppelgänger** network was targeting mostly Germany, France, the United States, and Ukraine. The network infrastructure was also involved in the Russian interference in the 2025 Polish presidential elections, by means of production and dissemination of anti-EU, anti-Ukrainian and anti-establishment narratives. In this case the Russian objectives were to:

1) T0079: **Divide** Polish society by enhancing polarisation and deepening division on socio-economic issues;
2) T0066: **Degrade Adversary** by undermining the image of the Polish Prime Minister and other members of the government;
3) T0002: **Facilitate State Propaganda** by promoting pro-Kremlin narratives[52].

False Façade (also known as CopyCop) is a Russian FIMI operation launched in late 2023[53]. The campaign was focused on targeting Western support for Ukraine by undermining the image of Ukraine and its leaders. It was also used for election meddling, targeting US and European political figures like Kamala Harris, Emmanuel Macron, Robert Habeck, and Ursula von der Leyen. False Façade consisted of a network of 230 inauthentic websites hosted on services that ignored or evaded law enforcement requests (bulletproof hosting), making it difficult to detect. False Façade's resilience lies in its network of pre-created websites and preparation of multiple backup domains in advance, which allows it to quickly recreate after takedowns. It thus minimized the impact of countermeasures applied by the EU member states.

Content was produced in English, French and German, and disseminated by influential booster nodes and influencers on X. Occasionally it was also translated into other languages, which enhanced outreach and ensured higher engagement[54].

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[51] Ibidem, p. 11-13.

[52] See: S. Nazari, P. Kryvenko, M. Voltsichina, A. Wójtowicz, *Illegal Doppelganger Operation: Targeting the Polish Elections*, Allience4Europe/Debunk.org, April 17, 2025, https://alliance4europe.eu/doppelganger-poland-elections [last access: 13.06.2025].

[53] *Building a false façade*, EUvsDisinfo, May 02, 2024, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/building-a-false-facade/ [last access: 26.06.2025].

[54] *3rd EEAS Report…op.cit*, p. 26-27.

Portal Kombat (also known as Pravda network) was created in 2022 by TigerWeb – a Crimea-based Russian IT company owned by Yevgeny Shevchenko[55]. It operates 200 inauthentic media outlets in 35 languages, targeting local and regional audiences across Europe, Africa and Asia. As per June 2025, these websites have produced several hundred thousands articles in multiple languages. Initially, the network was focused on regional audiences in Russia and Ukraine, shaping pro-Kremlin narratives about the full-scale military invasion. It expanded globally in 2024, while registering domains across Europe, Asia and Africa. In contrast to False Façade, this network also targets the Global South, while still prioritizing Western audiences.

Rather than creating new content, Portal Kombat replicates translated disinformative articles from selected sources, including official Russian government entities, state-affiliated media, Russian Telegram influencers and local anti-establishment outlets[56]. Through the Portal Kombat, Russia is also able to effectively influence the resources of AI models. In 2024, the Pravda network 'fed' Western AI systems with 3,6 million articles, thus making them respond to user queries with pro-Kremlin narratives. For instance, NewsGuard tested ten leading AI chatbots[57] The results revealed that in 33% of cases, AI models responded using pro-Kremlin content and citing Russian disinformation ecosystem as a source[58].

2.3. Russian Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) applied by Russia within its FIMI campaigns are characterised by continuous adaptation in the use of emerging technologies and in circumventing restrictive measures imposed against them. Russian FIMI campaigns typically follow a tried-and-tested model: initial provocative information is posted on an obscure website or social media account, and then disseminated by **prominent Telegram channels** with high follower counts, thereby amplifying its reach. To reach a wider audience, the information can be translated into several languages[59].

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Telegram has become the main channel for disseminating Russian disinformation and propaganda. The number of its users in Russia increased from 200,000 in 2018 to 853,000 in 2024. This has been influenced primarily by Roskmonadzor's blockage of Western social media on the territory of the Russian Federaion. This in turn translated into a decrease in the citation of posts from Facebook, Instagram, or X by the Russian

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[55] The activity of the Portal Kombat network was first exposed by the French counter-FIMI agency VIGINUM, see: *Portal Kombat. A Structured and Coordinated Oro-Russian Propaganda Network. Technical Report*, VIGINUM, February 2024,https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/20240212_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_PORTAL-KOMBAT-NETWORK_ENG_VF.pdf [last access: 23.09.2024].

[56] *3rd EEAS Report…op.cit*, p. 27.

[57] OpenAI's ChatGPT-4o, You.com's Smart Assistant, xAI's Grok, Inflection's Pi, Mistral's le Chat, Microsoft's Copilot, Meta AI, Anthropic's Claude, Google's Gemini, and Perplexity's answer engine.

[58] S. McKenzie, B. Isis, *A Well-Funded Moscow-Based Global 'News' Network Has Infected Western Artificial Intelligence Tools Worldwide with Russian Propaganda*, „News Guard", March 06, 2025, https://www.newsguardrealitycheck.com/p/a-well-funded-moscow-based-global [last access: 06.03.2025].

[59] *National Threat Assessment 2025*, State Security of the Republic of Lithuania/Defence Intelligence and Security Service Under the Ministry of National Defence, Vilnus 2025, https://www.vsd.lt/en/reports/national-threat-assessment-2025/, [last access: 12.03.2025].

media, with a sky-rocketing (481%!) increase in the citation of Telegram accounts in 2023[60]. Through state-controlled and aligned channels, Russia is shaping a falsified image of the war (its causes, course and results), while targeting both its own citizens and those abroad.

In the occupied territories of Ukraine, where access to independent news channels is limited due to Russian blockage, Telegram is used as the main propaganda tube. Moreover, it is used for recruitment to the volunteer battalions and armed forces of the Russian Federation as part of the so-called cryptomobilisation. Finally, in the EU and NATO states, Telegram is used by Russian intelligence services to recruit agents for disinformation, espionage and sabotage operations.

Table 3. The 15 most influential Telegram channels as of February 2024

Rank	Username	Name	Subscribers	Category
1.	rian_ru	РИА Новости	2,955,659	News and mass media
2.	rt_russian	RT на русском	844,043	News and mass media
3.	Dvachannel	Двач	809,090	Humor and entertainment
4.	Bbbreaking	Раньше всех. Ну почти.	1,581,722	News and mass media
5.	breakingmash	Mash	2,234,697	News and mass media
6.	tass_agency	ТАСС	367,468	News and mass media
7.	readovkanews	Readovka	2,350,491	News and mass media
8.	Rusbrief	BRIEF	504,358	Politics
9.	Bazabazon	Baza	1,122,987	News and mass media
10.	dimsmirnov175	Пул N3	328,778	Politics
11.	shot_shot	SHOT	878,016	News and mass media
12.	yandex	Яндекс	148,849	Technology
13.	SolovievLive	СОЛОВЬЁВ	1,291,762	Politics

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[60] A. Carvin (eds.), *Another Battlefield: Telegram As a Digital Front in Russia's War Against Ukraine*, DFR Lab, June 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/another-battlefield-telegram-as-a-digital-front-in-russias-war-against-ukraine/ [last access: 21.01.2025], p. 5, 7.

14.	mod_russia	Минобороны России	535,931	Politics
15.	Sashakots	Kotsnews	573,436	News and mass media

Furthermore, the Brookings study revealed increased use of TikTok by Russian disinformation ecosystem since the beginning of invasion of Ukraine. In 2024, 46 accounts were posting 10 or more posts a day on average. However, the number of active accounts on TikTok, and the number of posts per account, still lags far behind accounts on Telegram and X. Although Russian state-affiliated accounts are far more active on other platforms, engagement per post on TikTok is much higher compering to those shared by accounts on X. These posts on average have generated over 3,5 million engagements.

On average, TikTok posts draw approximately 100,000 total engagements per post, 3,5 times the rate of Telegram and 20 times the rate of X. If we remove views, which may be measured differently across platforms, engagement per post is still 13 times higher on TikTok than on X[61]. The growing influence of TikTok is demonstrated by the example of presidential election campaign in Romania in 2024, where the populist candidate Călin Georgescu made it to the second round, notably due to an 'externally sponsored' campaign on TikTok[62]. Yet evidence gathered by Romanian intelligence services led to the results being invalidated, and Georgescu himself was banned from running again.

To conclude, bots, troll farms and other forms of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) have been increasingly used to support the dissmeniation of pro-Kremlin narratives, as social media platforms remained the hotbed of FIMI activity. In 2024 Russia demonstrated a growing ability to:

- Misuse of AI in order to facilitate the process of creation of AI-generated content and to boost automated dissemination and the scaling-up of its distribution. Advances in the use of AI-generated content provided Russia with a low-cost option to create inauthentic content and increase the scale of FIMI activities. This is especially relevant for platforms like TikTok where content is solely visual, however it turned out useful for other FIMI campaigns as well - for example, in 2025 an increase in the activity of the Overload campaign is mostly consisted of videos resembling traditional media outlets created with the use of generative AI.

- Impersonation and creation of inauthentic news websites, such as in the „Doppelgänger" or „False Façade" campaigns, where Russia utilised a wide network of fake social media accounts and websites to mislead and confuse the public. In case of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential elections in 2024, over 170 fake websites impersonating (or completely faking) local U.S. newspapers, some with names that seemed real (e.g., Houston Post, Chicago Crier, Boston Times, DC Weekly, etc.), have been identified. They were created by Russian

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[61] V. Wirtschafter, *Tracing the Rise of Russian State Media on TikTok*, „Brookings", May 2, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tracing-the-rise-of-russian-state-media-on-tiktok/ [last access: 26.06.2025].

[62] V. Mădălina, S. Ioniță, *TikTok in Times of Crisis: Episode II WhatCcan We Observe in the Case of Romania?*, „Expert Forum Policy Brief", No. 194, December 1, 2024, https://expertforum.ro/en/files/2024/12/ENG-Policy-Brief-194-_2024_compressed.pdf [last access: 30.06.2025].

operatives employing 'information laundering' (see below) to attribute false information to a source that seems credible. The authors are rarely real journalists, but sometimes photographs of real people are used to increase credibility. In addition, YouTube videos were created where alleged informants or whistleblowers reassure viewers of the credibility of the sensational information[63].

- Recruitment of local influencers (proxies) including Western pro-Kremlin 'fake experts'[64], influencers, political activists etc. In order to hide the source of pro-Kremlin narratives, the Russian state television Russia Today (RT) channeled nearly 10 million $ to conservative American influencers through a local company Tenet Media, so that they produced Russia-friendly content and videos, aimed at influencing the outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential election'[65].

- Information laundering – spreading disinformation through layers of media to conceal and distance it from its Kremlin origins. In this context Russia uses a range of techniques, such as automated deceitful translation, misappropriation, click-bait headlines, smurfing[66], and the 'Woozle effect'[67], in order to build credibility and embed laundered information within public discourse, allowing falsehoods at the fringes of the media environment to shape mainstream narratives. This is a multi-layered influence process involving the combination and progressive application of a set of influence techniques that seeks to distort an event, a claim, or a fact[68]. False Façade is an example of Russian bi-directional information laundering strategy. First, selected articles from Russian state-controlled channels were republished by obscure network websites, often translated into multiple languages using AI. These articles were then amplified through other websites and YouTube channels, giving them a façade of legitimacy. In the reverse direction, the obscure network extracts content from staged videos featuring actors posing as whistleblowers or journalists. This material is repurposed into articles and circulated through channels that interact with the Russian state apparatus or independent outlets, sometimes appearing as sponsored content on poorly moderated websites. Finally, the cycle completes when the content is picked up by Russian state-controlled media, gaining credibility and legitimacy[69]. This is especially visible when analysing the case of the Pravda network - its main aim is to 'infect' a variety of sources and to appear in the search results of generative AI models.

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[63] F. Bryjka, *Russia and Iran Interfering in U.S. Presidential Election*, „PISM Bulletin", no. 128, September 2, 2024, https://pism.pl/publications/russia-and-iran-interfering-in-us-presidential-election [last access: 13.06.2025].

[64] The list of „fake experts" – individuals in the West who pose as experts but spread misleading information that aligns with pro-Kremlin narratives has been developed by Russian investigative journalists, see: *Fakesperts: Who Spreads Pro-Kremlin Disinfo in the West (Interactive map)*, „The Insider", October 2, 2024, https://theins.press/en/politics/265523 [last access: 13.06.2025].

[65] N. Kovalčíková, G. Spatafora, *The Future of Democracy: Lessons From the US Fight Against Foreign Electoral Interference in 2024*, „EUISS Brief", no. 22, December 2024, [last access: 21.01.2025].

[66] Smurfing is a term borrowed from money laundering, where an actor sets up multiple accounts or websites to disseminate the information

[67] 'Woozle effect' is produced, when fabricated or misleading citations are used repeatedly in laundered news items in an attempt to provide 'evidence' of their integrity.

[68] *How the Kremlin Launders Disinformation Around the Globe,* Center for Information Resilience, May 15, 2024, ttps://www.info-res.org/cir/articles/how-the-kremlin-launders-disinformation-around-the-globe/ [last access: 13.06.2025].

[69] *3rd EEAS Report…*op.cit., p. 26-27.

2.4. Russian FIMI ecosystem

Russian FIMI operations are conducted by disinformation channels and state centres controlling them. A large and coordinated network of Russian FIMI instruments, consisting of state-controlled media, social networks and pro-Russian websites, ensures dissemination of narratives that discredit the EU and its member states. In 2022, after two decades of investments in Russian disinformation and propaganda ecosystem, the amount allocated to state media increased tenfold to 115 billion roubles (1,5 billion dollars). Such an increase was related to influence operations in Ukraine, and later with the justification of full-scale military aggression against that country: from January to the end of March 2022, media spending increased threefold compared to the first quarter of 2021.

According to data from the DebunkEU.org, over 50% of these funds go to three state-owned news agencies – the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (including the channels Rossija 1 and Rossija 24), the Rossija Siegodnia concern (Sputnik, RIA Novosti, Ino- SMI.ru, Ukraina.ru) and RT (formerly Russia Today), which is mainly aimed at foreign viewers and broadcasts in six languages: English, Spanish, French, German, Arabic and Russian. The latter receives the largest share – almost 25%.[70] In 2025, the Russian government was planning to allocate at least 137,2 billion roubles (approx. 1,18 billion euro) to state outlets and platforms. This implies that state control over the information sphere is a crucial part of Russia's war effort, highlighting the connection between media control and that war effort[71].

To manage operations aimed at influencing the West, Ukraine and the Global South more effectively, at the end of 2022 Russian Presidential Administration established **Committees of Special Influence.** This structure is under the overall direction of Sergey Kiriyenko, responsible for assigning specific tasks against defined countries to special services, and to assess the effects of influence operations[72]. Kiriyenko – with the help of Sofia Zakharova who heads the special 'contact group' consisting of 15 representatives of the Presidentail Administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – oversees the work of two major companies directly funded by the Russian state and involved in FIMI operations: **Struktura** and **the Social Design Agency (SDA)** – both sanctioned by the EU, the UK and the US. In the Russian disinformation ecosystem, they replaced the **Internet Research Agency (IRA),** the very first infamous 'troll farm' located near Sankt Petersburg, owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin. After his death in a plane crash in 2023 his 'media empire' was dismantled.

Struktura and **the Social Design Agency** conducted FIMI campaigns aimed at undermining democracy in the EU and weakening support to Ukraine. SDA – responsible for Doppelgänger network – was founded in December 2017 by **Ilia Gambashidze**, a *politechnologist* who describes himself as an 'entrepreneur specialising in political consulting'[73]. For years, he advised politicians at the local level, and his company carried out tasks related to political marketing. Gambashidze was also the co-founder of an IT company Structura, belonging to

[70] J. Darczewska, *Zawładnąć…*op.cit., p. 55.

[71] *3rd EEAS Report…*op.cit., p. 12.

[72] J. Watling, O.V. Danylyuk, N. Reynolds, *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24*, „RUSI Special Report", February 2024, p. 8.

[73] M. Kupfer, *Investigation: Who Is Ilya Gambashidze, the Man the US Government Accuses of Running a Kremlin Disinformation Campaign?*, „Voice of America", May 09, 2024, https://www.voanews.com/a/investigation-who-is-ilya-gambashidze-the-man-the-us-government-accuses-of-running-a-kremlin-disinformation-campaign-/ [last access: 26.06.2025].

Nikolai Tupikin. Since the invasion of Ukraine, SDA has been operating on a much larger scale, with a turnover of 73 million roubles (730,000 euro) - four times higher than in 2021 – 17 million roubles. The company employs over 100 people, including former Internet advisers to President Putin, Alexei Gurovsky, and former journalist German Klimenko. Andrei Perla formerly a journalist and PR specialist for MP Vera Lekarieva – serves as the 'chief ideologist', while Mikhail Bijun is 'head of special operations'.

The SDA conducts campaigns targeting Europe and Israel (*Evropeiskaja kontr-kampanija*) and Ukraine (*Ukrajnskaja kontr-kampanija*). SDA employs 'ideologists', 'commentators', 'illustrators', and 'bot farm operators'. Disinformation teams undertake three types of activities: 1) monitoring, including traditional media, social media channels, opinion leaders, sociological research, and think tank reports; 2) analysis; and 3) content creation. Based on monitoring and analysis, they prepare 'lines of attack' (narratives) on the basis of which 'creations' (text content, fake comments, and caricatures) are developed. The results of the work are reported to 'contact group' and then to Kiriyenko[74].

Leaked internal SDA documents revealed that during the European election campaign, the company carried out activities aimed at helping far-right candidates achieve better results. Prior to European elections, SDA operatives thought that the the success of the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) political group in the European Parliament would benefit Russia. The scale of disinformation production was astonishing. In the first four months of 2024, the SDA's bot army generated 33,9 million comments, produced 39,899 'content units' on social media, including 4,641 videos and 2,516 memes and graphics[75]. The leaked files included instructions on how to craft comments (individual messages):

- "Write a comment from a 38-year-old German woman, who believes Germany is losing its main source of income: industry and a strong economy – we must stop wasting money on Ukraine and return to cheap Russian energy!"
- "Write a 400-character comment from a 38-year-old American woman who believes military aid to Ukraine and Israel should be cut. Zelensky is wasting taxpayers' money!"
- "Write a 400-character comment from a 38-year-old Polish woman, who believes the government is to blame for the country's rise in food prices. Poland is flirting with Ukraine; it has allowed a million Ukrainian migrants to settle in Poland, taking jobs and receiving benefits, it can't even solve the Ukrainian grain issue to protect its farmers! As a result, ordinary citizens who love this country and pay taxes suffer. This is not good for anything!"[76].

and fully-fledged narratives:

- "Liberals and globalists spread fear and want us to panic. We must fear war, climate disasters, viruses, and a Russian attack. Through fear, they seek our submission.

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[74] K. Limonier, *La guerre numérique de Vladimir Poutine : enquête sur les hackers d'État en Russie*, „Le Grand Continent", June 17, 2025, https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/06/17/enquete-ingerence-russe-europe/ [last access: 26.06.2025].

[75] M. Laine, A. Morozova, *Leaked Files from Putin's Troll Factory: How Russia Manipulated European Elections*, „VSquere", September 16, 2024, https://vsquare.org/leaked-files-putin-troll-factory-russia-european-elections-factory-of-fakes/ [last access: 26.06.2025].

[76] Ibidem.

Additionally, they aim to exploit contradictions around family values, LGBT rights, and the economic uncertainty caused by the war in energy and agriculture".
- "Blame politicians for dragging European countries into conflict".
- "The U.S is waging an economic and hybrid war against Russia at the expense of Germany. Anti-Russian decisions by NATO and the EU harm Germans first and foremost." [77]

The "Ukrainian grain issue" was heavily amplified by the Russian propaganda machine before the EU elections, presumably to sow division between Poland and Ukraine and undermine solidarity with Ukraine[78]. To undermine the image of Ukraine, SDA has distributed fake official documents, including fabricated orders from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Oleksandr Syrskyi, as part of its self-described efforts to discredit the military-political leadership of Ukraine and demoralize the Ukrainian Armed Forces. SDA created fake documents allegedly from European government entities, fake news stories from European outlets, and anti-Ukrainian memes that spread widely on social media.

The person responsible for shaping anti-Ukrainian disinformation and Kremlin propaganda (including the claim that 'there is no such country as Ukraine') is Aleksander Gromov – the former Soviet diplomat known as the 'minister of propaganda'. He has been responsible for media relations of the Kremlin since 1996. His routine duties include briefings with journalists and meetings with representatives of the uniformed services. His subordinate for public communication, Aleksandr Smirnov, works with them daily. Every Thursday, the heads of the main television stations, both state-owned and formerly private (All-Russian State Television and Radio Company, Channel One, TV Centr, NTV, Channel Five, etc.), meet in Gromov's office.

Depending on the current agenda, Kremlin officials take part in weekly 'operational meetings'. Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova is also a regular participant, which means that the Kremlin also 'formats' the ministry's media messages. During these meetings, Gromov instructs the audience on how to interpret current events, what to emphasise in reports, and what to omit. In emergencies, he calls journalists and gives them instructions. He also oversees the office responsible for the Kremlin's pool of journalists, i.e. selected representatives of the profession who constantly cover events involving the president, and the unit that prepares the daily news bulletin for Vladimir Putin. In the opinion of journalists, Gromov is a very influential member of Putin's team: the image of the world he creates shapes the attitudes and actions of the Russian elite and society[79].

To map out the Russian FIMI ecosystem, one can apply the **FIMI Exposure Matrix** – a novel analytical framework developed by the EEAS, that classifies disinformation channels based on the level of connection to a threat actor. It is composed of four categories: three are attributed to a threat actor, while the fourth includes non-attributed sources that still play a significant role in FIMI activities. Within the attributed group, two categories have transparent ties to the threat

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[77] Ibidem.
[78] Ibidem.
[79] J. Darczewska, *Zawładnąć…*op.cit., p. 98-99.

actor, while the third, along with the non-attributed category, maintains hidden connections or less apparent forms of coordination[80].

Category 1) official state communication channels directly operated by a government and its representatives, openly reflecting the state's statements:

- State institutions. This is the presidential administration, including spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Deputy Chief of Staff Alexei Gromov in particular; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with Sergey Lavrov and Maria Zakharova acting as central mouthpieces; Chief of Russian Foreign Intelligence (SVR) Sergey Naryshkin, Russian Embassies and Missions.

Category 2) state-controlled outlets - media funded, managed, and editorially controlled by state-appointed bodies or the ruling party. These outlets deliver the editorial line set by the state:

- Media and news agencies, eg. RIA Novosti, TASS, Interfax, RT, Sputnik, Golos Rossii, Rubaltic, Politnavigator, Baltnews, Ukraina.ru, Moscow24, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Channel One Russia, Zvezda TV, Ruptly TV, Inosmi, The Red Stream and others.
- TV channels. Some of the most popular channels are Rossija-24, Pervy Kanal, Rossija 1, TV Zvezda,TV Tsargard and NTV, while well-known propagandist journalists include Dmitry Kiselyov, Vladimir Solovyov, Margarita Simonian, Olga Skabeyeva, and Yevgeny Popov.
- State-controlled, non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). The most notable of which are Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Russian House, and the Russian Center for Science and Culture.
- Think-tanks. Most notable among them are the Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI), the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), the Russian Council for International Affairs (RIAC), the Center for Strategy and Technology Analysis (CAST), the Center for Energy and Security Research (CENESS), and the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), Katehon.

Category 3) state-linked channels - that operate under state oversight without publicly disclosing their affiliation. Uncovering their connection to the state requires a combination of evidence to reveal hidden patterns of influence or indirect control (eg. run by intelligence services, controlled by individuals with strong ties to the government or ruling party, or media outlets editorially directed or overseen by state actors).

- Troll farms: the Internet Research Agency (IRA), Struktura, and Social Design Agency (SDA) are among the most well-known.
- Social movements: Eurasian Youth Union of Igor Panarin, the International Eurasian Movement of Alexander Dugin.
- Websites belonging to pro-Russian organizations, associations, and foundations: some of the most well-known ones include Russkiy Mir, Valdai Club, the Gorchakov

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[80] FIMI Exposure Matrix is an instrument to reveal the connections between digital channels used in FIMI activities and the underlying infrastructure of threat actors. This model is key for exposing FIMI operations, ensuring precise terminology for threat actors' activities, and enabling the implementation of responses that are grounded in data and evidence, see: *3rd EEAS Report*…op.cit., p. 7, 15.

Foundation, the Institute for Civilization Dialogue in Berlin, the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation in Paris, and the Foundation for Battle Injustice.
- Geopolitical websites: New Eastern Outlook, Global Research, News Front, South Front, and Geopolitica.ru.
- War correspondents: such as WarGonzo, Rybar, Poddubnyy ZOV, and several channels linked to the Wagner Group.
- African Initiative, New Eastern Look, Observateur Continental, Argumenty i Fakty, Ren TV, MASH, Riafian, Global Research, African Stream, Life.ru, Lenta, Targard.tv, Izvestia, Readovka, NewsFront, Gazeta.ru.

Category 4) state-aligned channels - cannot be directly attributed to state control or funding and therefore remain unattributed, but show systematic signs of alignment with a state entity. They fall into this category until more evidence emerges to confirm attribution to state infrastructure.

- Portal Kombat, False Façade.
- Whistleblower portals. These include WikiLeaks and DCLeaks.
- Various types of alternative media.

Chart 2. Russian disinformation and propaganda ecosystem
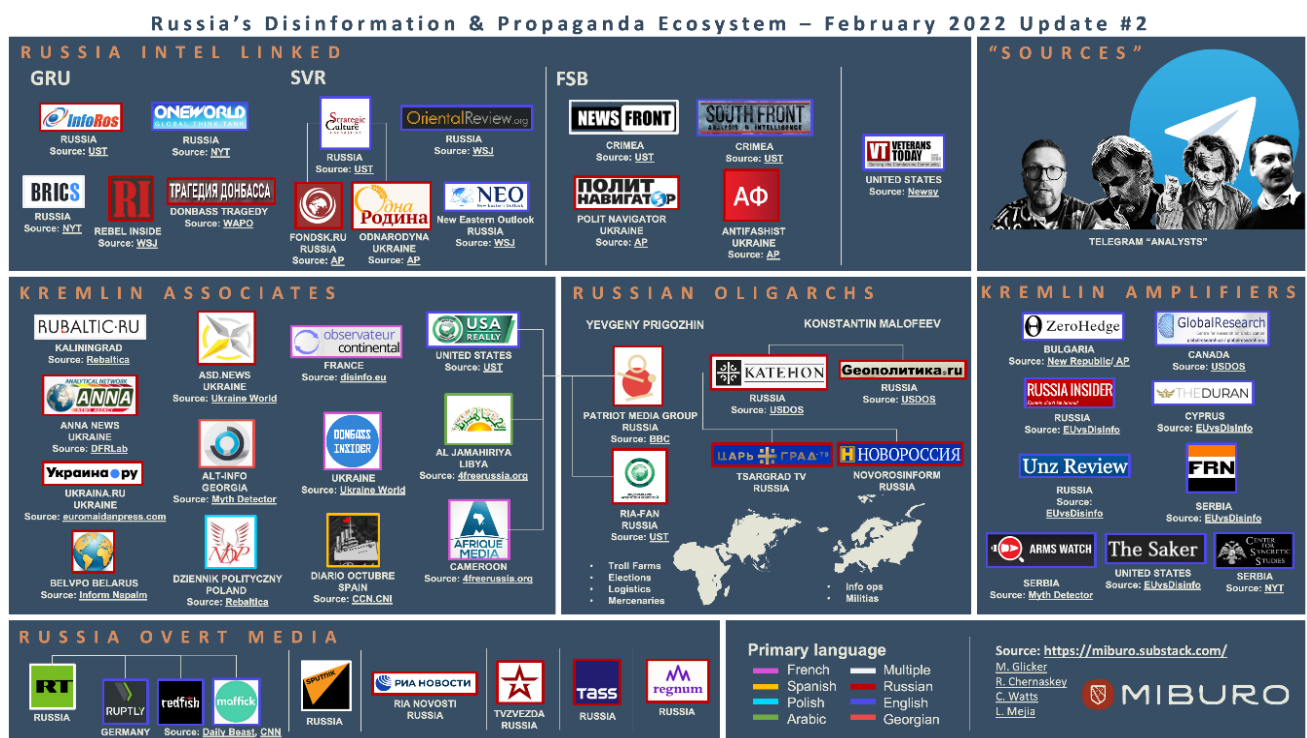
Source: C.Watts, *Russia's Propaganda & Disinformation Ecosystem - 2022 Update & New Disclosures*, „Selected Wisdom", February 15, 2022, https://clintwatts.substack.com/p/russias-propaganda-and-disinformation [last access: 26.06.2025].

2.5. Conclusions

Russia's FIMI operations represent a calculated, long-term strategic threat to democratic societies worldwide, particularly within the European Union and NATO. Far from being ad hoc or reactive, these campaigns are rooted in Russia's historical doctrine, institutionalized within

its political system, and weaponized to achieve specific geopolitical, ideological, and military objectives.

This chapter has demonstrated that Russian FIMI is not merely a matter of isolated propaganda efforts or spontaneous online disinformation, but a highly coordinated and state-sponsored campaign that integrates psychological operations, espionage, cyber interference, and manipulation of historical narratives. Its primary aim is the degradation of Western unity, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the advancement of Kremlin-friendly actors and narratives within target societies.

Through operations such as *Doppelgänger*, *False Façade*, and *Portal Kombat*, Russia has leveraged advanced technologies – including AI, algorithmic manipulation, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour – to reach global audiences across multiple platforms. These campaigns reveal a systematic effort to exploit social vulnerabilities, foment polarization, and delegitimize political opponents while masking their origin through sophisticated information laundering techniques and proxy networks.

Russia's FIMI ecosystem – consisting of official state actors, controlled media, intelligence agencies, pseudo-NGOs, think tanks, and troll farms – operates in a layered and adaptive fashion, ensuring both plausible deniability and operational resilience. It blurs the line between war and peace, foreign and domestic policy, and information and kinetic warfare, creating a complex and fluid battlespace where truth becomes increasingly difficult to discern.

The analysis also underscores that FIMI is central – not peripheral – to Russian statecraft. The Kremlin does not regard information as merely a tool of public diplomacy, but as a strategic weapon on par with conventional military assets. This orientation demands that democratic societies treat disinformation and information manipulation not just as nuisances or media issues, but as critical threats to national security, democratic integrity, and social cohesion.

Given the systemic nature of the threat, countering Russian FIMI operations requires a sustained, coordinated, and multidisciplinary response. This includes strengthening media literacy, enhancing cross-border intelligence cooperation, improving regulatory mechanisms for online platforms, and developing robust attribution frameworks. Moreover, democratic resilience must be fostered through renewed investment in civic education, trusted institutions, and societal cohesion.

Ultimately, as Russia continues to refine and escalate its information warfare capabilities, the challenge it poses will only grow more complex. Recognizing and addressing Russia as a systemic FIMI threat actor is no longer optional – it is a strategic imperative for the defense of democratic values and international stability.

Part III

Russian disinformation narratives on the invasion of Ukraine

„All military operations begin and end with PR specialists" – these words by Sergei Yastrzhembsky, a Russian diplomat and Putin's special advisor for information policy (since 2000), clearly demonstrate Russia's strategic approach to disinformation in times of war[81]. In this way, the author euphemistically suggested that Russia did not wage wars, but only 'military operations'. Although these words were spoken to mask Russian military actions in Chechnya, we can just as easily apply them to the full-scale war in Ukraine, which Russia refers to as a 'special military operation'. Calling it a war is punishable by up to 15 years in prison, according to regulations introduced by Roskomnadzor as part of war censorship prohibiting the 'deliberate dissemination of false information about the activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation'[82].

In preparation for the invasion of Ukraine, Russia intensified its disinformation efforts against that country and Western states. By attributing responsibility for the escalation of the situation in the occupied Donbas late 2021/begin of 2022 to the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) and accusing them of genocide, Russia has sought to fabricate a justification for its decision to recognise the statehood of the self-proclaimed republics and the subsequent launch of its 'special military operation' against Ukraine. The justification was to 'protect' the population of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) from 'genocide' and the need to 'de-nazify' Ukraine.

Accusations of ethnic cleansing and other crimes against the Russian-speaking population are a regular feature of Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Ukraine. In 2014, they were used to justify Russia's forced annexation of Crimea and support for the pro-Russia separatists in Donbas. This narrative intensified in February 2022 through an increase in Russia-inspired 'false flag' provocations, which were covert operations designed to attribute responsibility for the escalating tensions to the UAF and included artillery shelling of civilian targets, subversion and sabotage of critical infrastructure facilities, and terrorist assassinations of leaders of the self-proclaimed republics[83].

Since 2014, Russia has been promoting, both for internal use and in its relations with the West, a false image of Ukraine as an 'artificial state' devoid of any historical basis for its functioning, and a by-product of poor decisions of the Soviet leadership. Such a narrative is intended to

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[81] J. Darczewska, *Zawładnąć…*op.cit., p. 93.

[82] A. Legucka, *Russia's Wartime Censorship and Propaganda*, „PISM Bulletin", No. 52, April 1, 2022, https://pism.pl/publications/russias-wartime-censorship-and-propaganda [last acess: 18.06.2025].

[83] F. Bryjka, *Russian Disinformation Regarding the Attack on Ukraine*, „PISM Spotlight", No. 15, February 25, 2022, https://pism.pl/publications/russian-disinformation-regarding-the-attack-on-ukraine [last acess: 18.06.2025].

undermine the Ukrainian people's right to sovereignty and independence and to justify Russian claims to lands inhabited by Ukrainians. Ukraine is also presented as a 'failed state' that is unable to protect its citizens and has no chance of integration into NATO and EU structures. At the same time, the Ukrainian government is described as a 'Nazi junta' that violates the rights of the Russian-speaking population and came to power as a result of a Western-inspired coup ('colour revolution'). The myth of a neo-Nazi Ukraine is built up by Russian media through extreme nationalist circles. Ukraine is also presented as a 'puppet' and a 'tool' in the hands of the West to be used against Russia.

The Russian government and Kremlin media also have been using terms such as the 'Kiev regime', 'Washington's puppets', 'fascists', 'bandits' and, in particular, 'Nazis' and 'neo-Nazis', and even 'satanists' with greater intensity. According to research by the EU East StratCom Task Force, there was a 290% increase in the use of the word 'Nazis' in Russian pro-Kremlin media between February and April 2022, and a more than 500% increase in the use of the word 'genocide'[84]. This was intended, on the one hand, to dehumanise the Ukrainians in the eyes of the Russians, and, on the other hand, to convince international public opinion that Ukraine is not an independent entity, but merely an instrument of American interests in Europe, used against Russia in international competition (to build an 'anti-Russia' on its territory)[85]. Russian authorities further insinuated that the U.S. built biotechnology laboratories in Ukraine responsible for spreading viruses that could threaten international security. Russia presented this claim at the UN Security Council in March and October 2022.[86]

FIMI activities targeting EU member states were aimed at creating an image of Ukraine as a failed and corrupted state that is unable to defend its citizens and should not receive any support from the West. Suggesting its readiness to retaliate, Russia intended to foster fear in Western societies and weaken the resolve of their governments to assist Ukraine. To this end, Russia mobilised radical political circles in Europe and the U.S. to sharpen public debate, stir up anti-Ukrainian sentiment, and stoke divisions within the transatlantic community[87].

For example, in February 2022, more than 65% of FIMI narrarties directed at Lithuania concerned its military and defence capabilities. In this way, pro-Kremlin media intended to undermine the sense of security of Lithuanian society. At the time, FIMI campaigns were aimed at dividing the West and undermining support for Ukraine. They portrayed Russia as a state defending itself against U.S. 'imperial expansionism' and the 'threat from NATO'[88]. Another

[84] F. Bryjka, A. Legucka, *Rozmowa z Martyną Bildziukiewicz – szefową unijnego zespołu ds. walki z rosyjską dezinformacją (EU East StratCom Task Force)*, „Sprawy Międzynarodowe", 2022, no. 2, pp. 9-18. DOI:10.35757/SM.2022.75.2.02

[85] M. Karelis, *Fake Leads, Defamation and Destabilization: How Online Disinformation Continues to Impact Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, „Intelligence and National Security", March 22, 2024, p. 1-11, DOI: 10.1080/02684527.2024.2329418

[86] F. Bryjka, A. Legucka, *EU Efforts to Combat Russian Disinformation about the War in Ukraine and Build EU Resilience to Information Challenge*, [in]: J. Szymańska (ed.), The European Union in the Face of Russia's Agression Against Ukraine, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw 2024, p. 142-143.

[87] F. Bryjka, *Russian Disinformation…*op.cit.

[88] C. Schuette, *Russian Disinformation on NATO Expansion and the War in Ukraine*, „Journal of Strategic Security", 2023, Vo. 16, No. 4, p. 34-50, DOI: https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.16.4.2125

objective was to undermine the legitimacy of Western sanctions, which the Russian government would like to reduce and lift. In Germany, for example, online trolls took advantage of public sentiment about rising inflation and stirred up discussions about sanctions, suggesting that they were more severe for the West than for Russia.[89]

With the prolongation of hostilities, Russia has been exploiting war fatigue in the West to undermine the rationality of support for Ukraine. It hoped to provoke divisions within NATO and EU states and consequently weaken military aid. Russian disinformation exploits the waning confidence in Ukraine's victory, socioeconomic problems, and nuclear threats. At the end of 2023 Russian Special Influence Committees defined the strategic framework for campaigns against Ukraine. The narratives were aimed at:

1) *discrediting the Ukrainian military and political leadership* (e.g., by spreading corruption allegations);
2) *creating divisions within the Ukrainian elite* (e.g., by publicly fuelling disputes between President Volodymyr Zelensky and former Commander-in-Chief Gen. Valery Zaluzhny);
3) *weakening the morale of the Ukrainian military* (e.g., by exaggerating the losses on the Ukrainian side, the lack of state support for veterans and injured soldiers, or undermining the sense of continuing to fight,); and
4) *confusing and weakening the morale of the Ukrainian population* (by threatening a general mobilisation that allegedly includes minors, or undermining the credibility of support from Western partners)[90].

These narratives were mainly disseminated through 'troll farms', initially producing more than 1,300 texts and 37,000 comments on Ukrainian social media per week. The promoted messages were then assessed in terms of coverage, which is one of the factors determining the next narrative lines[91]. As part of the Doppelgänger campaign carried out on X, in 2024 (June-July) a Russian bot network (530 accounts) generated at least 16,000 posts in six languages (French, German, English, Russian, Turkish, and Polish) promoting the following narratives related to the war in Ukraine:

– *delegitimising Ukraine's government* – claiming that Ukraine is destined to lose the war; the country is plagued by corruption, its army is demoralized and weak, and Western countries will eventually halt their weapon deliveries. Questioning the legitimacy and functionality of Ukraine's government, often framing it as corrupt or ineffective;
– *opposing Western support for Ukraine* – criticizing Western countries' financial and military support for Ukraine; often framing it as wasteful or harmful to local economies;
– *portraying NATO as aggressor* – depicting NATO as a threat to stability; suggesting its actions provoke conflict and jeopardize international security;
– *emphasising Russian strength and stability* – promoting Russia's resilience and self-sufficiency. Portraying the country as a stabilizing global force;

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[89] F. Bryjka, A. Legucka, *EU Efforts…*op.cit., p. 141-142.
[90] F. Bryjka, *Russia Intensifies Disinformation Offensive Against Ukraine*, „PISM Bulletin", No. 46, March 23, 2024, https://pism.pl/publications/russia-intensifies-disinformation-offensive-against-ukraine [last acess: 18.06.2025].
[91] Ibidem.

–   *highlighting divisions within the West* – amplifying social and political conflicts within Western countries; implying weakening alliances and internal instability. Seeking to pit the U.S. against Europe regarding the war and suggesting that Europe will ultimately bear the financial burden[92].

3.1 Hierarchy of the narratives

The importance of distinguishing between various types of narratives and organizing them within a hierarchical framework allows to better understand how meaning is constructed and communicated in international affairs[93]. Narratives are not isolated rhetorical devices but interconnected structures that serve both communicative and strategic purposes[94]. These narrative layers – ranging from broad ideological constructs to specific situational messages – help clarify the intentions of international actors and how they attempt to influence both domestic and foreign audiences.

A particularly influential approach to narrative classification is the three-tiered model proposed by Lawrence Freedman. It differentiates between metanarratives, narratives, and messages[95]. Metanarratives, also known as grand narratives, function as overarching frameworks deeply rooted in cultural or ideological traditions. They provide the foundational worldview within which subordinate narratives are developed. These dominant discourses often define the parameters of what is considered legitimate, just, or true in a particular political or historical context.

Narratives, occupying the intermediate level, typically address identity or systemic issues. They offer coherent storylines about actors, values, threats, and conflicts, often drawing on metanarratives for legitimacy. At the most granular level are messages – brief, context-specific claims or slogans that support and disseminate broader narrative structures. The hierarchical classification of narratives enables a nuanced examination of how Russia constructs its image, defines adversaries, and rationalizes its actions through layered discursive mechanisms[96].

3.1.1. Metanarrative: Russian civilizational exceptionalism and moral order

At the highest level lies the messianic metanarrative of Russia as a unique civilizational entity with a moral mission. The metanarrative builds on ideological elements such as Russian messianism and exceptionalism, portraying the West as spiritually corrupt and geopolitically

[92] A. Atanasova, R. Giannardi, P. Ünsal, *Verified Disinformation: How X Profits From the Rise of a Pro-Kremlin Network*, „Reset Tech", December 2024, p. 8.
[93] A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, New York: Routledge, 2017.
[94] J. Halverson, H. Goodall, S. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, Palgrave McMillan, New York 2011, p. 11–14.
[95] L. Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, London–New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 30-40.
[96] Ibidem.

aggressive[97]. Russian exceptionalism draws heavily on the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome and the spiritual legacy of Orthodoxy[98]. This belief system frames Russia as fundamentally distinct from Latin Europe, often portraying the nation not only as a successor to Rome and Byzantium, but also as the 'New Israel' or even a 'paradise on earth'[99]. Within this worldview, two main strands emerge: 1) an imperial, state-driven form of exceptionalism linked to political power, and 2) a popular, spiritual variant rooted in the image of Holy Rus. While these currents sometimes overlap, the former emphasizes the state as the bearer of a special mission, whereas the latter elevates the Russian people as a chosen nation.

The Orthodox Church has historically supported both currents, reinforcing the notion of a sacred imperial order. This sense of exceptional destiny later evolved into Soviet ideology and remains central in contemporary Russia's strategic culture. The dominant feature of Russian narratives of exceptionalism is their deeply conservative character. Rather than advocating change, they promote a return to idealized historical patterns. The Russian vision of the future is rooted in the past, expressing a desire to restore pre-modern order and resist external influence through backward-looking, anti-hegemonic narratives.

One of the ways Russia constructs its sense of exceptionalism is through the dual meaning of the word *mir* in the Russian language, which signifies both 'peace' (as the absence of war) and 'world' (as a civilizational space)[100]. This linguistic ambiguity is not coincidental –it serves as a tool to legitimize Russia's expansive ambitions, both cultural and, at times, military. In this context, appeals to 'peace' are not necessarily about coexistence, but rather about the extension of civilizational control.

The concept of *Russkiy Mir* (Русский мир) – literally 'Russian World' – does not denote a peaceful order in the traditional sense. Instead, it represents a civilizational sphere encompassing societies culturally linked to Russia through language, religion, and shared identity. It is aimed particularly at Russian and Russian-speaking minorities[101]. Ideologically, *Russkiy Mir* serves as the basis for Russia's claim to intervene in the affairs of other states, where culturally Russian populations reside. This narrative frames such interventions as acts of protection and spiritual kinship under the guise of maintaining 'peace' – a peace defined not by absence of conflict, but by alignment with Russian cultural and geopolitical influence.

Russian authorities consistently portray themselves as open to dialogue and committed to peace, continuing a tradition rooted in Soviet-era practices. The Soviet Union similarly promoted

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[97] A. Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*…op.cit., p. 5.
[98] A. Curanović, *Przeznaczeni do wielkości! Poczucie misji w polityce zagranicznej. Przypadek Rosji*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw 2020, p. 100-116.
[99] S.L. Baehr, *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia. Utopian Patterns in Early Secular Russian Literature and Culture*, Palo Alto 1991, p. 13-21.
[100] M. Lachowicz, A. Legucka, *The Vision of Peace à la Putin: Russia's Strategic Objectives Towards the Baltic Sea States in the Context of the War in Ukraine*, in: J. Itrich-Drabarek, M. Cichosz, D. Plecka, A. Jach (eds.), „For Security and for Peace: States and Societies of the Baltic Sea Basin and the Russian-Ukrainian War", London– New York: Routledge, 2024, pp. 128–141.
[101] G. Faulconbridge, *Putin Says Russia Ready to Negotiate Over Ukraine*, „Reuters", 25 December 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-ready-negotiate-over-ukraine-2022-12-25/ [last access: 25.05.2025].

peace propaganda at a time when it was repressing its own citizens and subjugating Central and Eastern Europe, while advocating for 'peaceful coexistence' on the global stage. This vision of peace was fundamentally flawed, based on the false premise that 'a country that employs inhumane methods of governance within its territory can create a fair and lasting peace'[102]. Here, the example of narratives are the following: 'Russia genuinely wants peace, but is ignored' or 'Putin has repeatedly offered peace – no one listened'[103].

Russia's strong focus on the East–West (good-evil) dichotomy serves several strategic functions. It provides an ideological frame that casts the conflict as a civilizational clash between a morally corrupt West and a righteous, traditional East. This simplifies the narrative and strengthens Russia's claim to defend universal, conservative values. It also helps externalize blame, shifting attention from domestic issues by presenting the West as the root of all crises. Furthermore, the dichotomy mobilizes nationalist sentiments within Russia by invoking the historical image of a hostile West, thereby consolidating internal support. At the same time, it seeks to weaken Western unity by appealing to anti-American and pacifist audiences, especially in Europe. Ultimately, framing the war as a defensive struggle against Western aggression helps Russia justify its actions and maintain ideological consistency in its domestic and international messaging.Interestingly, the meta-narrative is not always communicated directly. Below, a quantitative analysis of the terms related to Russian civilisation in the Polish infosphere is presented to illustrate this point. The total reach of such content accounts for less than 60 million (January-July 2025), and compared to other narratives, it is less significant.

In contrast, the peace narrative, tightly associated with Russian exceptionalism gained much greater traction especially in 2023, and seems significantly more deeply rooted in the Polish infosphere: it gained a total reach of over 300 million between January and July 2025.

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[102] M. Kornat, *Jałta – fałszywa wizja pokoju światowego*, in: S. Łukasiewicz (ed.), *Jałta. Rzeczywistość, mit, pamięć*, Warszawa: Insytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2019, pp. 15-47.

[103] Own study based on data collected by Debunk.org on peace negotiations.

Chart 3. Reach of the topic of superiority of Russian civilisation in Polish-language media between January and July 2025
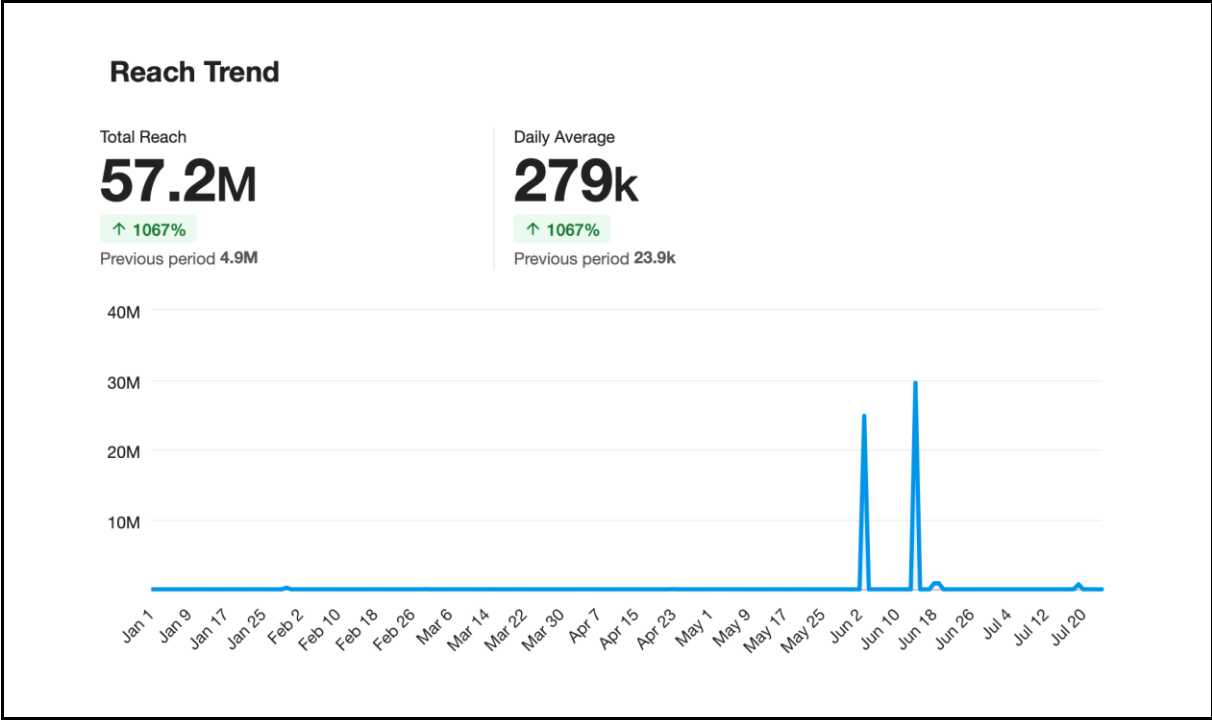
Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 4. Reach of the "Tak dla Pokoju" (Yes to Peace) and "Nie dla Wojny" (No to War) phrases in Polish-language media between January and July 2025
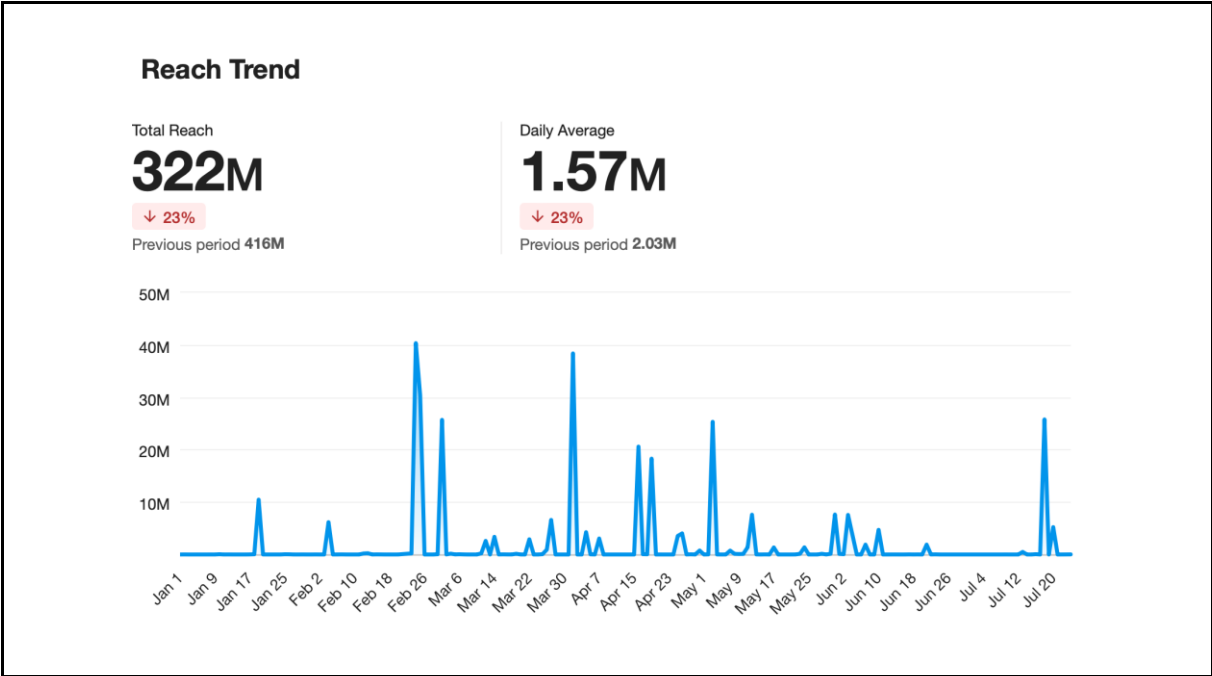
Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

3.1.2. Narratives

Narratives occupy the mid-level in the hierarchy of communication, serving as a bridge between overarching ideological structures and detailed, situational messages. This section discusses the main types of Russian narratives: systemic, identity-based, and problem-oriented. A key element of the analysis is the variation in the number of mentions across different narrative categories.

In the context of Ukraine and the war, the dominant categories are identity narratives (10 types), systemic narratives (5 types), and problem narratives (2 types). This distribution highlights how central Ukraine is not only to Russia's international identity, but also to the domestic legitimacy of Vladimir Putin. This uneven distribution reflects the priorities of Russian propaganda, which are rooted in the perception of Ukraine within the broader context of transforming the global order. This is why the dominant narrative revolves around the idea that the war in Ukraine is a proxy war. Through this lens, Russia attempts to portray Ukraine as a non-existent state and recasts the conflict as a broader geopolitical confrontation between the West and the East.

The cumulative frequency of these messages underscores the importance of delegitimizing Ukrainian statehood and governance as a central vector of Russian messaging. It suggests that these narratives play a strategic role as rhetorical weapons aimed at weakening Western military support for Ukraine. The quantitative distribution also reveals an important regularity: the more general the narrative is, the more frequently it is repeated. Identity and systemic communication frameworks are deployed far more intensively than problem narratives, which primarily function as emotional amplifiers within the broader narrative architecture.

Table 4. Russian disinformation narratives and messages on invasion of Ukraine after February 2022 identified by the 'defenders community'

	Narratives	Type	Mentions	Messages	Mentions
1.	*West wages Proxy War Against Russia*	Systemic	**478**	*The 'Collective West' is directing a proxy assault on Russia*	337
				NATO's eastward expansion was a deliberate provocation	81
				The West left Russia no choice but to defend itself	60
2.	*Ukraine has no true statehood and is historically Russian land*	Identity	**332**	*Ukrainians and Russians are one people divided by the West*	157
				Ukraine is not a real nation; it has always been part of Russia	111
				Crimea and Donbas returned home through legal referendums	41

				Modern Ukraine is an artificial creation of Bolshevik Russia	24
3.	*Ukraine is a Nazi / fascist state that must be de-Nazified*	Identity	**297**	Ukraine is ruled by Nazi sympathisers who oppress minorities	126
				Russia's operation is liberating Ukraine from neo-Nazis	112
				Azov and similar units prove the regime is fascist	59
4.	*Ukrainian Leadership Is Inept and Corrupt*	Identity	**296**	Kyiv's government is inept, corrupt and/or on the verge of collapse	112
				Zelensky is a Western puppet—rumored to be on drugs	110
				Zelensky and his family buy luxury property and yachts with aid funds	34
				Ukrainian troops are deserting, surrendering en masse; mobilisation fails	25
				Western-supplied weapons are already destroyed or ineffective	13
				Aid money is stolen by Ukrainian officials and oligarchs	6
				Other	6
5.	*Russia is carrying out Humanitarian Liberation of Russian-Speakers*	Identity	**270**	Russian Army is saving Russian-speaking Ukrainians from Kyiv's oppression	124
				This is a 'special military operation,' not an invasion	73
				Russia's actions are humanitarian intervention	69
				The West left Russia no choice but to defend itself	4

6.	**Western Media and Tech Are Anti-Russian**	Systemic	**194**	*Western outlets and journalists lie and censor genuine Russian perspectives*	156
				Russophobia is a weapon unleashed by European elites	30
				Those, who speak the truth about Russia, are silenced	8
7.	**Peace talks, not weapons, are needed — military aid only escalates the war**	Identity	**186**	*Western weapons escalate the conflict and kill more Ukrainians*	87
				The war can only end through negotiations; arms prolong the bloodshed	55
				Stopping aid would force Kyiv to the negotiating table and save	40
				Western taxpayers fund corruption, not victory	3
8.	**Russia intervened to stop genocide of Russian speakers**	Identity	**174**	*Moscow had to protect its people from extermination*	93
				Kyiv committed genocide in Donbas for eight years	50
				Russian-speaking civilians were shelled daily by Ukraine	30
				Ukrainians and Russians are one people divided by the West	1
9.	**Ukrainian military commits atrocities and war crimes**	Problem	**159**	*Kyiv's forces shell their own cities and blame Russia*	62
				Ukrainian soldiers/Western mercenaries torture POWs and execute civilians	49
				Ukrainian troops hide in schools and hospitals, forcing return fire	19
				Ukrainian units loot and terrorise liberated areas	16
				Other	6

10.	*Kyiv Fabricates Russian Atrocities*	Problem	**140**	*Ukraine's own artillery kills its civilians for propaganda*	44
				The Bucha massacre, Mariupol hospital strike etc. were staged	39
				Civilian casualty figures are wildly exaggerated by Kyiv	21
				Claims of genocide against Russian-speakers are baseless lies	20
				Kyiv's own artillery kills its civilians for propaganda	8
				Kyiv's forces shell their own cities and blame Russia	6
				Other	2
11.	*Western Sanctions Backfire on Europe*	Systemic	**123**	*Europe's (economic and/or energy) crisis is self-inflicted by anti-Russian sanctions*	47
				While Europe crumbles, Russia's economy remains strong and booming	45
				Food and fertiliser shortages in Europe stem from Western policies	22
				Nord Stream sabotage reveals Western sabotage of Russian gas	7
				Other	2
12.	*Western weapons fuel corruption and black-market crime*	Systemic	**109**	Western taxpayers fund corruption, not victory	53
				Aid money is stolen by Ukrainian officials and oligarchs	42
				U.S./EU arms shipped to Ukraine end up on the black market	14
13.	*The West is morally corrupt*	Identity	**81**	*Western societies have abandoned God and tradition*	57

	and promotes perversion			*LGBTQ ideology is forced onto children and institutions*	13
				Degeneracy is celebrated while faith and family are mocked	9
				Other	2
14.	*Ukrainian refugees are a burden to host countries*	Identity	**56**	*Ukrainian refugees drain welfare budgets and social services*	19
				Crime rises wherever Ukrainian refugees settle	18
				Refugees take jobs and housing from native citizens	18
				Other	1
15.	*Ukraine persecutes the Orthodox Church and believers*	Identity	**48**	*Priests are jailed while Nazi collaborators are honoured*	22
				Russia defends Christianity against Kyiv's repression	16
				Kyiv bans the canonical Orthodox Church and seizes monasteries	10
16.	*Ukraine is a terrorist state*	Identity	**37**	*Ukraine carries out terrorist attacks in other countries, foremost Russia*	33
				Nord Stream was sabotaged	4
17.	*Secret U.S. bioweapon labs operate in Ukraine*	Systemic	**32**	*Pentagon-funded labs in Ukraine are creating biological weapons*	16
				The West hides the truth; Russia is exposing the labs	11
				Kyiv is developing chemical and biological weapons for war	5

Source: *own compilation based on the data provided by Debunk.org*

3.1.3. Systemic Narratives

Systemic narratives address broader geopolitical configurations. They challenge the legitimacy of the current liberal international order, claiming that it serves the interests of the West at the expense of global equity. According to Russian systemic narratives, the United States maintains

an unjust hegemony through economic coercion, military alliances, and cultural domination[104]. Systemic narratives aim to redefine the global political order by accusing the West of disrupting peace and stability. These are the most frequently repeated narratives across the entire dataset, reflecting their strategic importance in Russia's external communication. Their purpose extends beyond disinformation – they shape a comprehensive geopolitical worldview that legitimizes Russia's foreign policy goals and positions the country as a corrective force in an allegedly unjust world order.

Narrative "The West wages a proxy war against Russia" (478 mentions) dominates the field. Messages such as "NATO provoked Russia" (81) and "The West left Russia no choice but to defend itself" (60) are designed to recast Russia's aggression as reluctant self-defense. This narrative not only attempts to shift the blame for the war onto Western actors but also normalizes Russia's interventionist behavior as a rational response to Western encroachment. From a strategic standpoint, such framing is essential to maintain domestic support. It fosters a siege mentality among the Russian public, encouraging national unity against a perceived existential threat. Internationally, it seeks to sow doubt among neutral or non-aligned states, particularly in the Global South, by presenting Russia not as an aggressor but as a victim of Western imperialism.

The narrative "Western media and tech are anti-Russian" (194 mentions) builds on the logic that is against Russia. It presents the global information ecosystem as biased, manipulative, and controlled by hostile forces. By accusing Western platforms of censorship and Russophobia, this narrative preemptively discredits critical information and cultivates distrust among Russian and sympathetic foreign audiences. It is a calculated attempt to insulate domestic opinion from external influence and create epistemic ambiguity on the global stage.

A similarly manipulative narrative is "Western sanctions are backfiring on Europe" (123 mentions), which draws attention to inflation, energy crises, and social unrest in the EU. The message is twofold: first, that sanctions are ineffective in weakening Russia, and second, that they harm European populations more than Russian ones. The intent is to divide Western societies, foster public discontent, and weaken transatlantic unity by portraying the costs of supporting Ukraine as intolerable.

The systemic theme of corruption is amplified in "Western weapons fuel black-market crime and corruption" (109 mentions). Allegations like "Weapons end up on the black market" (14) are not merely aimed at discrediting Ukraine but are also intended to undermine the moral authority of Western democracies. This narrative questions the integrity of humanitarian and military aid, suggesting that the West is enabling chaos rather than delivering justice. It feeds into broader conspiratorial thinking and attempts to delegitimize the entire framework of international support for Ukraine. An overtly cultural narrative, "The West is morally degenerate" (81 mentions), targets liberal values such as LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and secularism. These themes serve to define the West as culturally toxic, decadent, and hostile to

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[104] J.J. Mearsheimer, *Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis*, „The Economist", 11 March 2022, https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis [last access: 25.05.2025].

traditional values. In contrast, Russia is positioned as the last stronghold of spiritual, moral, and civilizational order. This contrast not only strengthens Russia's internal ideological cohesion but also appeals to conservative audiences worldwide, especially those disillusioned with Western liberalism.

Finally, "The U.S. operates secret bioweapon labs in Ukraine" (32 mentions) introduces a conspiratorial thread into the broader information landscape. These pseudoscientific narratives offer a veneer of rationality to justify Russian actions, framing them as defensive rather than aggressive. By invoking public fears of pandemics and technological threats, they shift focus away from verifiable facts and toward emotionally charged speculation, undermining trust in institutions and distorting public understanding.

Systemic narratives serve multiple strategic functions. Domestically, they preserve regime legitimacy by externalizing blame for the conflict and economic hardship. They frame the Russian state as under siege, thereby discouraging dissent and reinforcing a sense of patriotic duty. Internationally, these narratives aim to erode support for Ukraine, fragment Western alliances, and undermine liberal norms. They also seek to forge new ideological alliances with non-Western countries by presenting Russia as a civilizational alternative to a decaying West. By controlling the narrative around the war's causes and consequences, Russia attempts not only to justify its current actions but also to reshape the global information landscape in its favor. These systemic narratives are not isolated statements; they form an interlinked ideological framework that portrays Russia as the guardian of multipolarity, tradition, and justice in a chaotic and morally compromised world.
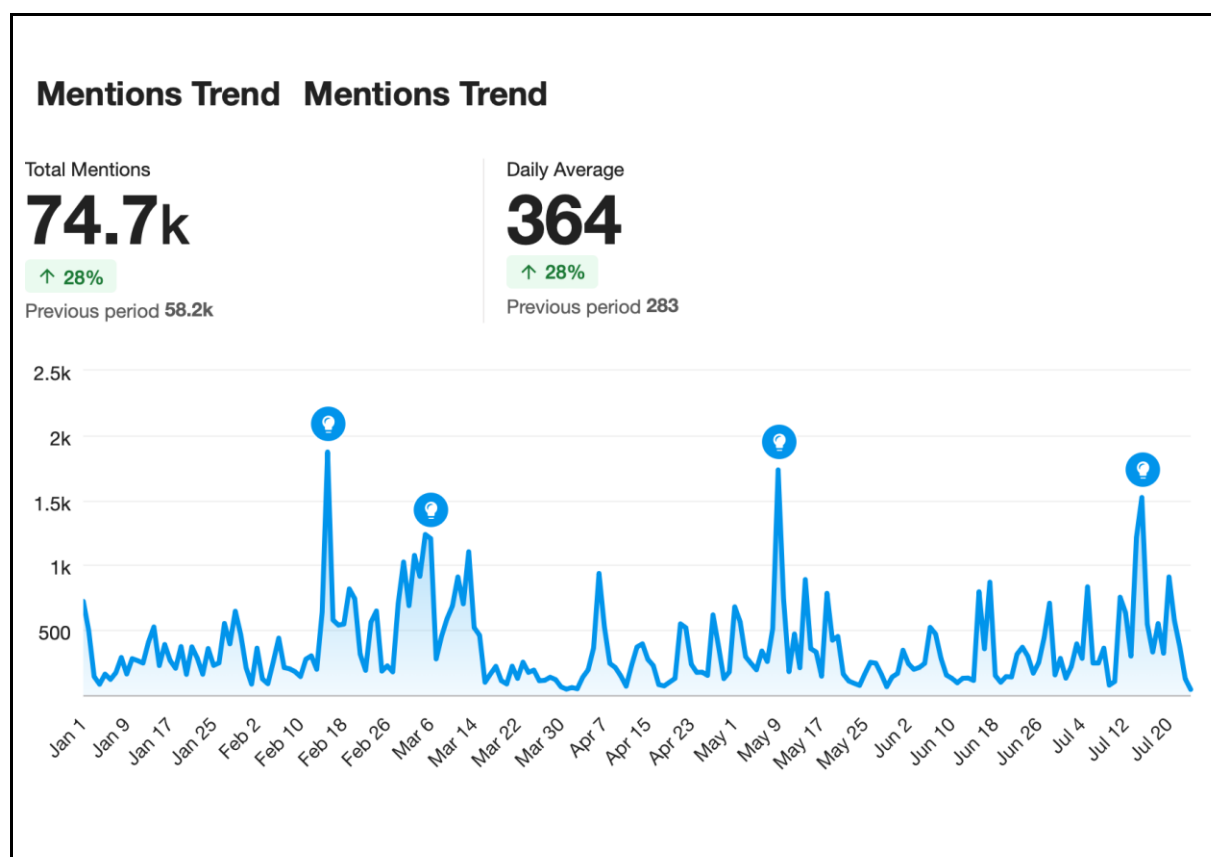
3.1.4. Identity Narratives

Russian identity narratives construct the nation as a besieged fortress defending itself from a hostile, encroaching West. This self-perception is rooted in a history of invasion, resistance, and victory, particularly drawing on the symbolism of the Great Patriotic War. In contemporary rhetoric, the Russian Federation portrays itself as a peace-loving nation forced into conflict to protect its values and people. **Identity narratives** focus on defining Russia as a moral force, a civilizational anchor, and a defender of traditional values. Their primary function is to present a binary, axiological worldview: good (Russia) versus evil (Ukraine and the West). Quantitative analysis confirms that identity narratives are among the most heavily exploited categories in Russian information strategy.

For example, the narrative "Ukraine has no true statehood and is historically Russian land" (332 mentions) is foundational. It includes messages such as **"Ukrainians and Russians are one people"** (157 mentions) and **"Modern Ukraine is a Bolshevik creation"** (24 mentions), which serve to delegitimize Ukraine's sovereignty and right to self-determination. It constructs an alternative historical account in which Ukraine has never existed independently but is rather a natural extension of Russia.

Another prominent narrative is **"Ukraine is a Nazi fascist state and must be denazified"** (297 mentions). This includes claims that **"Azov and similar units prove the regime is**

fascist" (59) and **"Russia's operation is liberating Ukraine from neo-Nazis"** (112). They invoke deeply embedded historical symbols from the Soviet victory in World War II, equating Ukraine with fascism, serves both to demonize the enemy and to mobilize public support within Russia. This narrative positions Russia as a liberator continuing its historic mission against evil, transforming its offensive war into a morally sanctioned crusade.

Chart 5. Number of mentions of the "Ukraine is a fascist or nazi state" narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

The identity narrative **"Russia is carrying out a humanitarian liberation of Russian-speaking citizens"** (270 mentions) reframes the war as a moral obligation. The key message here is that **"This is not an invasion, but a special military operation"** (73), which normalizes and justifies the military action of Russia. They brand the war as a moral obligation, labeling it a "special military operation" strategically avoiding the term "war," downplaying the severity of the conflict and legitimizing it as a humanitarian necessity. This narrative minimizes internal dissent and boosts patriotic conviction, portraying Russia as acting not in self-interest but out of duty.

A further narrative, **"Ukrainian leadership is inept and corrupt"** (296 mentions), often includes personal attacks on President Zelensky, portraying him as a **"Western puppet"** or **"drug addict"**, and as someone enriching himself with aid funds. These attacks

aim to delegitimize Ukraine's democratic governance and frame it as a dysfunctional client state manipulated by external actors. Such narratives erode trust, not only in Ukraine's institutions but also in the broader liberal-democratic order.

Religious framing appears in **"Ukraine persecutes Orthodoxy"** (48 mentions), with narratives like **"Kyiv bans monasteries and jails priests"**, reinforcing Russia's self-image as protector of faith. This is further extended in the **"Ukraine is a terrorist state"** narrative (37 mentions), which alleges Ukrainian involvement in cross-border sabotage, such as the **Nord Stream incident**. By positioning itself as the last bastion of spiritual and moral integrity, Russia strengthens its civilizational narrative in opposition to a secular and morally decaying West.

Identity narratives do not merely legitimize military actions; they embed these actions within a broader moral and spiritual mission, painting Russia not as an aggressor, but as a moral actor resisting Western evil, and besieged civilization defending its people, faith, and values from Western corruption and hostility. These narratives are carefully crafted and widely disseminated to strengthen internal cohesion, suppress dissent, and manipulate international opinion. Their repetition and emotional resonance underscore their central role in Russia's information warfare strategy.

Chart 6. Reach of the "Ukraine is a fascist or nazi state" narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025
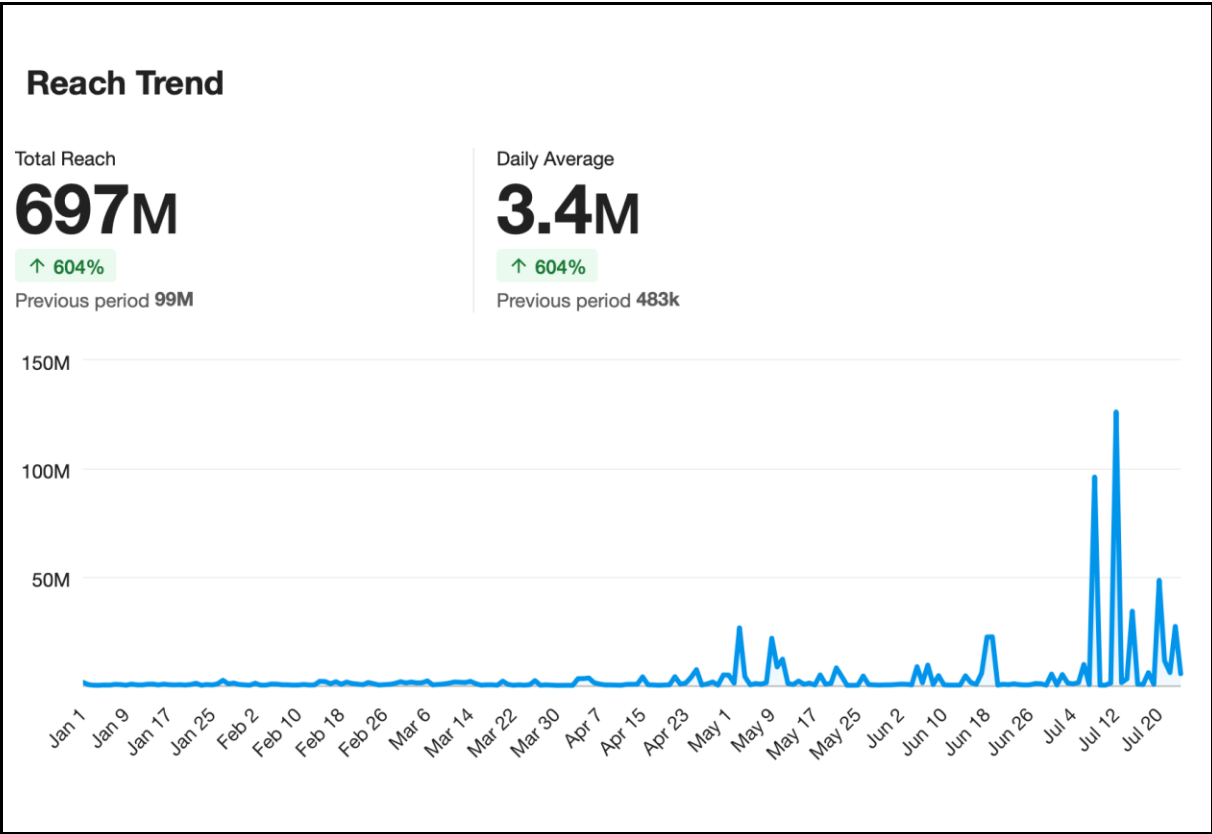
Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

3.1.5. Problem Narratives

Problem narratives pertain to specific conflicts or negotiation processes. In the context of Ukraine, Russian state discourse frames peace talks as sabotaged by Western interference or Ukrainian intransigence. For example, the breakdown of talks following the discovery of civilian massacres in Bucha is blamed on Western media manipulation rather than on Russian military actions[105]. Problem narratives function by grounding broader identity and systemic messages in specific, emotionally charged events. They serve as the tangible proof or "evidence" that reinforces the larger ideological and moral claims made by the Russian state. Through vivid, personalized stories and allegations, these narratives provoke visceral emotional reactions—shock, outrage, fear, or sympathy – which enhance the resonance of the more abstract narratives about global order or civilizational struggle.

One of the most prominent examples is the claim that "Ukraine commits war crimes" (159 mentions). This narrative includes detailed and often graphic allegations: that Ukrainian forces shell their own cities, torture prisoners of war, use civilians as human shields, or conduct summary executions. The aim of such accusations is to invert the dominant Western narrative, which portrays Ukraine as a victim of aggression, by instead framing it as a perpetrator of violence. In doing so, Russia not only attempts to morally equalize the conflict but also shifts the blame for civilian casualties, destruction, and brutality onto Kyiv. These narratives are especially powerful in creating doubt and moral ambiguity, particularly in audiences who are already skeptical of mainstream media or fatigued by continuous war reporting.

Another common theme is that "Kyiv fabricates Russian atrocities" (140 mentions). Key elements include claims that "Bucha was staged" (39 mentions), "civilian casualties are exaggerated" (21 mentions), and that Ukrainian artillery targets its own people to manipulate public opinion. The purpose here is twofold. First, these claims seek to undermine the credibility of independent reporting, international investigations, and human rights documentation. Second, they aim to confuse international audiences by presenting alternative versions of events that muddy the waters and make it difficult to discern truth from propaganda. In a context of contested narratives and information overload, even the suggestion of uncertainty can be a powerful tool.

Perhaps the most strategically revealing problem narrative is "Peace talks, not weapons, are needed" (186 mentions). This narrative argues that Western military aid prolongs the war and increases civilian suffering, and that Russia is ready for diplomacy while the West prefers escalation. This framing allows Russia to present itself as a rational actor seeking de-escalation, thereby rebranding its aggressive behavior as peacemaking. Engaging in peace dialogue with the West Kremlin is intended to demonstrate that it fears Russia and is willing to make concessions in order to de-escalate the conflict. This, in turn, increases Russia's inclination to continue its aggressive policies and reinforces the belief among Russian elites that such an

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[105] *Szef MSZ Rosji zgłasza gotowość do negocjacji z Zachodem ws. Ukrainy*, „Rzeczpospolita", 30 December 2023, https://www.rp.pl/konflikty-zbrojne/art37797481-szef-msz-rosji-zglasza-gotowosc-do-negocjacji-z-zachodem-ws-ukrainy [last access: 25.05.2025].

approach is effective[106]. The Russian propaganda apparatus cynically exploits the rhetoric of "peace" to discredit Ukraine and its Western supporters[107].

Russian authorities promote the narrative that the war could have ended long ago if Ukraine had not received "lethal" weapons[108]. The Kremlin blames Ukraine for civilian casualties and war-related destruction[109]. The spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, stated that for a "lasting and just peace" in Ukraine, the West should stop supplying weapons to Kyiv, while Ukraine should accept the "new territorial realities," cease fighting, and withdraw its forces from what Russia claims as its territory[110]. This narrative exploits growing "war fatigue" in Western societies and appeals to anti-war movements, pacifist constituencies, and fiscal conservatives concerned about the cost of prolonged involvement in Ukraine. It turns moral arguments against Ukraine's supporters, suggesting that those who send weapons are the true instigators of suffering[111].

The strategic purpose of problem narratives is clear: they give the appearance of specificity and factuality, anchoring ideological claims in supposedly concrete realities. They also personalize the conflict, attaching faces, bodies, and blood to abstract debates about geopolitics. In doing so, they strengthen the emotional and moral appeal of identity and systemic narratives, ensuring that the broader framework resonates not just logically, but also viscerally. These narratives undermine trust in institutions—both domestic and international. By discrediting Western media, humanitarian organizations, and democratic governments, they aim to create an informational environment in which no actor but Russia is seen as credible. This erosion of trust is not a side effect – it is a strategic goal. When citizens and foreign audiences are bombarded with contradictory information, they become either apathetic or susceptible to authoritarian messaging that promises clarity, order, and strength.

Russia's use of problem narratives is deeply embedded in its hierarchical information strategy. At the top are metanarratives: ideological frames like Russian exceptionalism, spiritual superiority, and multipolar resistance to Western hegemony. Below them are systemic and identity narratives that translate these grand ideas into geopolitical logic and moral dichotomies. At the base lie problem narratives – specific, emotionally charged, and seemingly factual—that bring the entire structure to life.

Messages are concise, emotionally resonant statements that reinforce broader narratives. These include:

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[106] M. Menkiszak, *Winning the War with Russia: The West's Counter-Strategy Towards Moscow*, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), „OSW Report", February 23, 2023, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/PV_89_Winning-the-war-with-Russia_net.pdf [last access 01.07.2025].

[107] M. Lachowicz, A. Legucka, *The Vision of Peace*…op.cit., pp. 128–141.

[108] A. Legucka, *Russia Using Peace Propaganda as Path to Victory in Ukraine*, „PISM Bulletin", no. 25, 16 February 2024, https://www.pism.pl/publications/russia-using-peace-propaganda-as-path-to-victory-in-ukraine [last access 01.07.2025].

[109] *МИД назвал условия «устойчивого и справедливого» мира на Украине*, "RBC.ru", 09 December 2023, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/12/2023/657482d09a7947a7686f57aa [last access: 01.07.2025].

[110] Ibidem.

[111] M. Lachowicz, A. Legucka, *The Vision of Peace*…op.cit., pp. 128–141.

- "Ukraine shelled Donbas for 8 years".

- "NATO provoked the war".

- "Zelensky is a puppet of the West".

- "Russia defends traditional values".

- "Europe will freeze without Russian gas".

- "Victory is near; Russians support our cause".

- "Ukraine refuses peace and sacrifices its own people".

- "Bucha was staged to halt negotiations".

Such messages are not always logically coherent but serve tactical functions: maintaining domestic morale, legitimizing aggression, and shifting blame. As Szostek points out, emotional resonance in narratives often outweighs factual accuracy in shaping public opinion[112].

Chart 7. Reach of the "Zelensky is a pupper of the West" narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025
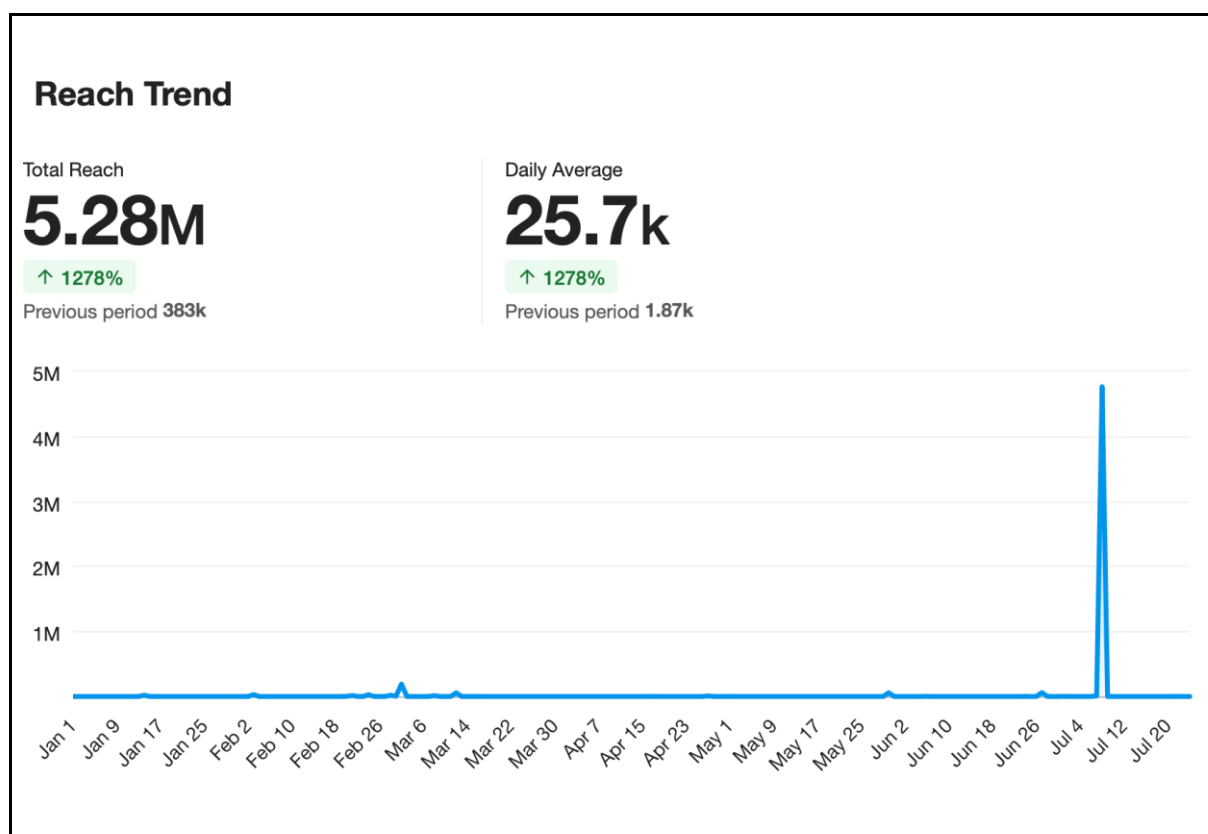
Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

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[112] J. Szostek, *The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine: The Role of Linkage*, „Perspectives on Politics", vol. 15, no. 2, 2017, p. 379-395.

Chart 8. Reach of the "Ukraine shelled Donbas for 8 years" narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025

Reach Trend

Total Reach
484k
↓ 38%
Previous period **776k**

Daily Average
2.36k
↓ 38%
Previous period **3.78k**

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

3.2. Case study: Ukraine has no true statehood and is historically Russian land
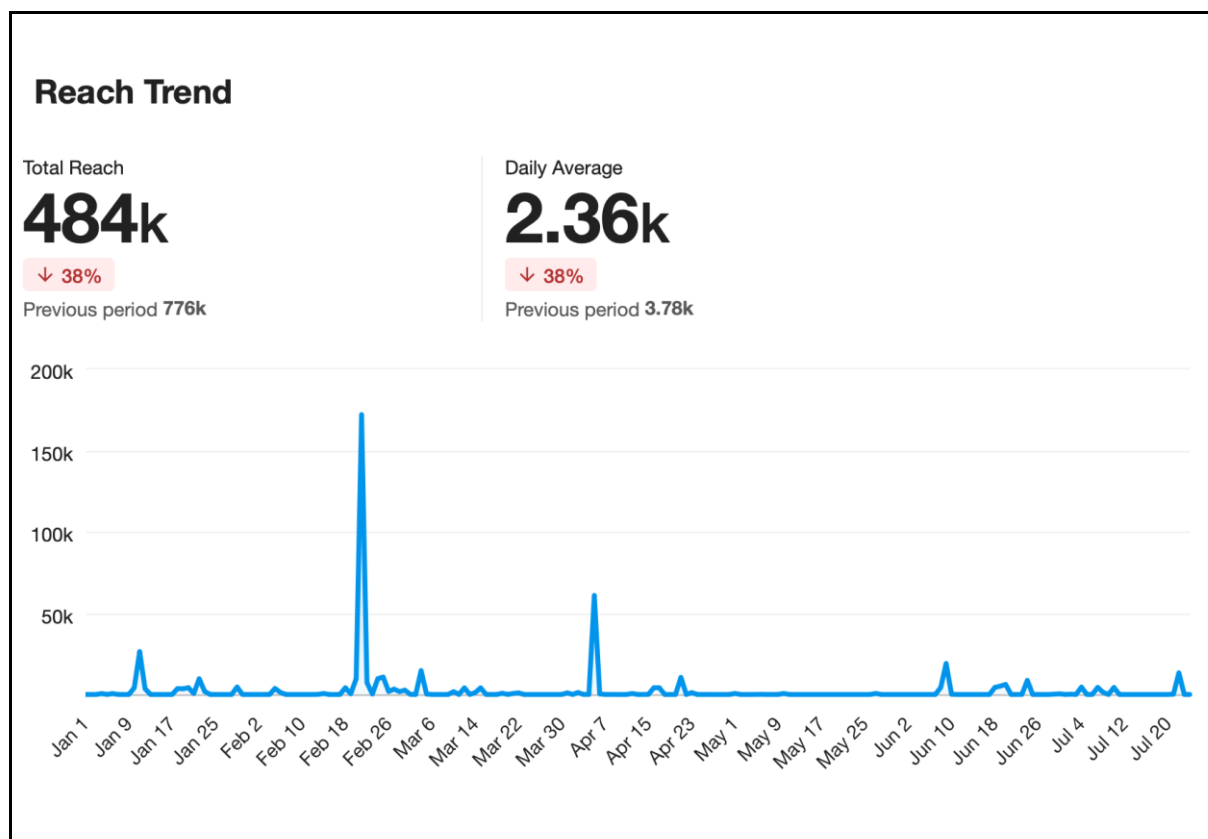
Russian disinformation encompasses various aspects, including history, and it must be clearly distinguished from legitimate historical discourse[113]. As the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce once observed, 'all history is contemporary history', and the past is narrativized to suit the present-day, while storytelling legitimates the narrator's role[114]. Historical interpretation shapes the chaos and has a moralizing impulse, and invites listeners to participate in it. Russia does not simply provide an alternative interpretation of the past, nor is it comparable to memory diplomacy, which seeks mutual understanding through shared commemorative practices[115]. Instead, it is a form of strategically motivated falsification and manipulation of historical memory in service of state objectives. As Adam Daniel Rotfeld and Anatolii W. Torkunov warned, the key danger lies in 'consciously falsifying the past – obliterating what was shameful

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[113] A. Legucka, *History as a Tool of Russian Disinformation: Targeting Poland*, in: R. Kupiecki, A. Legucka (red.), „Disinformation and the Resilience of Democratic Societies", Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2023, p. 69.

[114] B. Croce cited in: B. Kordan, *Russia's War Against Ukraine: Historical Narratives, Geopolitics, and Peace*, „Canadian Slavonic Papers", 2022, vol. 64, no. 2–3, p. 162–172. DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2022.2107835.

[115] J. Suau Martínez, C. Juarez Miro, *Understanding Disinformation as Narratives in the Hybrid Media Ecosystem: Evidence from the US, Journalism*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241303249.

and worth stigmatizing'[116]. In their view, historical memory significantly shapes both national identity and the perception of political reality; when deliberately distorted, it becomes a powerful instrument of division and deceit. Vladimir Putin uses history to explain and justify Russia's war against Ukraine[117].

A paradigmatic example of such weaponization of the past is President Vladimir Putin's narrative that Ukraine is not a sovereign state, but historically an inseparable part of the Russian world. This message reflects a broader Kremlin strategy of merging historical myth with present-day geopolitical ambition. The disinformation effort seeks to reshape public understanding – both domestically and internationally – through emotionally resonant, identity-forming storytelling[118].

As Keir Giles argues, this approach is far from incidental. It is ideologically deliberate and strategically calculated, rooted in the Kremlin's conviction that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a historical catastrophe, and that Western post-1991 dominance must be challenged. To achieve this, Russia invokes selected episodes of glory, victimhood, and betrayal to frame its present confrontation with NATO, the EU, and the United States[119].

These narratives are not abstract. In the case of Ukraine, they manifest through several interconnected messages: (1) "Ukrainians and Russians are one people divided by the West," (2) "Ukraine is not a real nation; it has always been part of Russia," (3) "Crimea and Donbas returned home through legal referendums," and (4) "Modern Ukraine is an artificial creation of Bolshevik Russia." These claims are structured according to a disruption-restoration logic – an imagined rupture in historical continuity caused by foreign interference, followed by the Russian-led reassertion of order[120].

This strategic manipulation of history functions to legitimize Russia's great power status, particularly through references to World War II and the post-Yalta order[121]. These are not just commemorative gestures; they assert Russia's inherited right to global leadership. By portraying itself as the victor over fascism and the architect of postwar stability, Russia seeks moral and political validation for regional dominance, particularly over Ukraine[122]. Within this framework, Ukraine is rendered not as an equal sovereign actor but as a temporarily lost province whose return is both inevitable and just. The Ukrainian historical narrative is fundamentally European, centering on the evolution of national identity and the protracted pursuit of statehood. Ukrainian historians frame this narrative as one of cultural and political development rooted in the legacy of Kyivan Rus', with origins that are often portrayed as both indigenous and connected to broader Eurasian contexts.

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[116] A. D. Rotfeld, A. V. Torkunov (eds.), *White Spots. Black Spots. Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations 1918–2008*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2015, p. 6, 7.
[117] B. Kordan, *Russia's…*op.cit., p. 162–172.
[118] A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives..*op.cit.
[119] K. Giles, *Moscow Rules…*op.cit., p. 117–120.
[120] M. Hellman, *Security, Disinformation, and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, available online: https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-58747-4.
[121] A. Legucka, *History…*op.cit., p. 69.
[122] B. Kordan, *Russia's…*op.cit., p. 162–172.

In contrast, Russian storytelling is constructed through the lens of imperial legacy. It is a chronicle of expansion, domination, and the cyclical nature of power – its acquisition, exercise, and eventual loss. Russian story often emphasizes themes of struggle, sacrifice, and national grandeur, portraying Russia as a civilization shaped by relentless contestation with external powers such as the Poles, Swedes, and Ottomans. This narrative frames imperial practices as civilizational missions, wherein peripheral communities – including Ukraine – are integrated into the imperial core through processes of control and assimilation. The divergence between these two narratives is not merely one of emphasis but of foundational worldview.

The Ukrainian story privileges self-determination and European integration, whereas the Russian narrative presupposes a hierarchical relationship that casts Russia as the dominant actor and Ukraine as subordinate. These conflicting historical imaginaries contribute significantly to geopolitical tensions, as they assign incompatible roles to the same entities: Russia as the destined hegemon, and Ukraine as either a passive subject or a resistant adversary. The friction, therefore, lies not only in political interests but in the clashing logics of identity and historical purpose embedded in each narrative[123].

Strategic narratives of this kind are aimed at shaping global perceptions. By depicting Russia as the defender of a multipolar world—contrasted with a hostile, U.S.-led unipolarity – Moscow attempts to reclaim ideological authority and erode the normative legitimacy of NATO and the EU[124]. The 2021 Russian National Security Strategy confirms this orientation, identifying 'protection of historical truth' as a core national security priority, thereby militarizing the very concept of memory[125].

The invasion and occupation of Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine in 2014 were accompanied by powerful symbolic campaigns. Russian-backed forces mobilized Soviet iconography, especially the St. George's ribbon, while spreading accusations of Ukrainian 'fascism' as justification for military action. Ribbon became 'a symbol of two wars' – one historical, the other geopolitical – serving as a Trojan horse to inject Russia's modern ambitions under the veil of sacred memory. A new federal law introduced in 2022 designated the black-and-orange ribbon as a symbol of military glory and imposed severe penalties for its desecration, further reinforcing the state's monopoly on historical memory after the criminalization of alternative interpretations of World War II. Simultaneously, new symbols emerged in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine: the letter Z, associated with the slogan "Za Pobedu" ("For Victory"), and the letter V, tied to the phrase "Sila v pravde" ("Strength is in Truth")[126]. The latter phrase originates from the cult film *Brat 2*, which promotes Russian

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[123] Ibidem.

[124] C. Cunningham, *A Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer*, Seattle: Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, 12 October 2020, https://jsis.washington.edu/news/a-russian-federation-information-warfare-primer/ [last access 30.06.2025].

[125] *Strategy of the National Security of the Russian Federation*, approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 400 of July 2, 2021, https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/nss_rf_2021_eng_.pdf [last access 30.06.2025].

[126] I. Marandici, *Z-Propaganda and Semiotic Resistance: Contesting Russia's War Symbols in Moldova and Beyond*, „Comparative Southeast European Studies", vol. 71, no. 4, 2023, p. 585–616, https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2023-0024.

exceptionalism and expresses anti-Ukrainian, anti-American, and racist sentiments. Russian state communications reinforce a narrative of moral superiority and legitimize both military aggression and territorial claims such as those over Crimea.

The disinformation narratives also serve crucial domestic purposes. The image of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' allows Vladimir Putin to consolidate his role as the protector of the nation's sacred past. Jane McGlynn observes that the Russian state has 'instrumentalized the powerful memory of Soviet heroism and victimhood to legitimize its rule'[127]. By embedding patriotic memory into political loyalty, dissent becomes equated with national betrayal.

The emotional weight of these narratives is a central component of their power. Suau Martínez and Juarez Miro emphasize that disinformation operates not only through content but through affective identification[128]. It creates communities of belief that are highly resistant to factual correction—especially during periods of uncertainty or crisis, which destabilize meaning, making them fertile ground for political actors to impose fixed interpretations that serve their interests.

Externally, Russian narratives target countries like Ukraine, which is portrayed as inherently Russophobic and unstable. This delegitimization is designed to weaken Ukraine's credibility and influence within the EU and NATO, while polarizing internal debates in the West[129]. According to Cianciara, such narratives not only persuade – they contest legitimacy and disrupt democratic consensus[130]. By framing Ukrainian sovereignty as dangerous revisionism, the Kremlin seeks to justify its aggressive policies while discrediting Ukraine as a partner in European security.

3.2.1. A narrative analysis

Narrative analysis allows the exploration of narrative content and structure. Following a structuralist approach by Shanahan et al. it is argued here that narratives consist of identifiable components that can be studied empirically and generalized across space and time[131]. A narrative analysis of the message that claims, 'Ukrainians and Russians are one people divided by the West', can be conducted using the structuralist approach of Shanahan et al., complemented by Hellman[132]. This narrative operates across emotional, symbolic, and political levels and has demonstrable influence in shaping public perception, especially during geopolitical instability. It is rooted in a broader metanarrative promoted by the Kremlin, which portrays Russia as the historical and moral center of Eastern Slavic civilization, while

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[127] J. McGlynn, *Memory, Power and Putin: The Use of Soviet Victory Narratives in Modern Russia*, „Europe-Asia Studies", 2022, vol. 74, no. 3, p. 429–447.

[128] J. Suau Martínez, C. Juarez Miro, *Understanding Disinformation…*op.cit.

[129] F. Bryjka, A. Legucka, *EU Efforts…*op.cit., p. 142-143.

[130] A.K. Cianciara, *The Politics of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, London–New York: Routledge, 2020.

[131] E. Shanahan, M.D. Jones, M.K. McBeth, C.M. Radaelli, *The Narrative Policy Framework*, in: C.M. Weible, P.A. Sabatier (eds.), „Theories of the Policy Process", 4th ed., Boulder: Westview Press, 2018, p. 176–198.

[132] M. Hellman, *Security, Disinformation…*op.cit.

presenting the West as a corrupting and imperial force that seeks to dismantle traditional values and strategic autonomy in the post-Soviet space.

In this narrative, the key characters follow classic archetypes. The Russian state and President Vladimir Putin are portrayed as the heroes, guardians of a common historical and cultural space, seeking to restore unity and protect shared identity. Russia's role is framed as a historically legitimate and morally necessary one, grounded in centuries of shared language, Orthodox Christianity, and intertwined political development with Ukraine. The narrative invokes foundational myths such as the baptism of Kyivan Rus in 988 and the unity forged through Soviet victories in the Great Patriotic War.

The West – especially the United States, NATO, and the European Union – are cast as villains, the external actors that have deliberately disrupted this unity by manipulating Ukraine through regime change and liberal ideology. According to the narrative, these powers have promoted color revolutions, infiltrated Ukrainian media and civil society, and used international institutions as tools of influence. The narrative casts these actors not only as geopolitical adversaries but as morally bankrupt agents of chaos who undermine family, tradition, and religious values.

The Ukrainian people are framed as victims, misled and alienated from their 'true' roots by Western interference. They are often described in Russian media as suffering from the consequences of failed Westernization, including political instability, economic hardship, and cultural disintegration. Ukrainian political elites and pro-Western actors appear as either complicit fools or blind opponents, too naive or too corrupt to see the so-called truth. They are often represented as puppets or traitors serving foreign interests at the expense of their own people.

The plot of this narrative is built around a nostalgic and mythologized past where Russia and Ukraine were part of one great civilization, from Kyivan Rus to the Soviet Union. The story then identifies a crisis moment: the collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by revolutions in Ukraine such as the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. These events are presented not as legitimate domestic expressions of agency but as orchestrated efforts by the West to divide and weaken. Temporarily, the narrative moves from an idealized past through a present defined by crisis and fragmentation to a future where Russia restores order, identity, and justice.

The key problem identified is the artificial separation of one people by ideological manipulation. Responsibility for this crisis is assigned squarely to Western powers, who are portrayed as seeking to weaken Russia by tearing Ukraine away from its rightful place. The call to action is not merely political but moral: to resist Western expansion, to restore historical unity, and to reject false sovereignty. The solution offered is a return to geopolitical and civilizational order, with Russia as the protective elder brother.

The moral of the story is centered on restoration. Russia is portrayed as a benevolent force, trying to reclaim its historical role and shield the Ukrainian people from further harm. The narrative invokes both religious symbolism and World War II mythology, portraying intervention as salvation. The desired end-state is the re-integration of Ukraine into Russia's sphere of influence, which is represented as a return to balance and peace. This moral message

is often reinforced by media content, commemorative practices, and public diplomacy that link Russia's current actions to past sacrifices and victories.

This structure, as Wagnsson and Barzanje emphasize, is harmful not only because of its content but because of how meaning is created and distributed[133]. It combines emotional appeal with simplistic binaries: good versus evil, tradition versus corruption[134]. The relational construction of this narrative interacts with broader narratives of Russia as a besieged fortress, the West as decadent and immoral, and the need for moral clarity in geopolitics. hese constructions resonate powerfully because they tie personal and collective identity to historical grievance and myth[135].

Disinformation of this kind has real effects. It delegitimizes Ukrainian sovereignty, justifies military aggression, and provides a coherent worldview that rationalizes authoritarianism. McGlynn has shown how the Russian government exploits Soviet-era memory to reinforce political control, equating loyalty to the state with loyalty to a shared historical narrative[136]. This strategic communication creates affective communities in which any dissent is viewed as a betrayal of national identity and collective memory. Suau Martínez and Juarez Miro stress that such affective storytelling is resistant to correction, especially in times of crisis[137].

Moreover, this narrative does not operate in isolation. It is supported by state media, amplified by social media bots, and legitimized through cultural institutions such as historical museums, war memorials, and state-approved education. These platforms reinforce the same character roles, the same crisis logic, and the same call to action. Through repetition and emotional framing, they build a coherent story world that feels familiar and morally justified to domestic audiences. Abroad, the narrative seeks to destabilize democratic discourse by polarizing debates and undermining confidence in Ukrainian political agency.

By breaking down this message into its narrative components – characters, plot, and moral – the analysis reveals how its internal logic and structure amplify its persuasive power. As Shanahan et al. explain, understanding how stories are told is critical to understanding their influence[138]. Through temporal framing, symbolic elements, and identity-driven appeals, this narrative weaponizes history not just to persuade, but to dominate. The strategic use of narrative structure enables the Russian regime to create simplified yet emotionally resonant stories that function as tools of both domestic control and foreign destabilization.

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[133] C. Wagnsson, C. Barzanje, *A Framework for Analysing Antagonistic Narrative Strategies: A Russian Tale of Swedish Decline*, „Media, War & Conflict", 2019, p. 1–19.

[134] T.B. Naterstad, *The Reproduction of Nationalism and the Nationalism of Reproduction: Putin's Biopolitics of Defending Tradition, 2012–2021*, „Nationalities Papers", 2025, vol. 53, no. 1, p. 142–161. DOI: 10.1017/nps.2023.85.

[135] R. Kupiecki, A. Legucka (eds.), *Disinformation…*op.cit., p. 68-80.

[136] J. McGlynn, *Memory, Power and Putin…*op.cit., p. 429–447.

[137] J. Suau Martínez, C. Juarez Miro, *Understanding…*op.cit.

[138] E. Shanahan, M.D. Jones, M.K. McBeth, C.M. Radaelli, *The Narrative Policy Framework…*op.cit., p. 176–198.

3.3. Conclusions

Propaganda and disinformation against Ukraine occupies a central place in Russia's broader narrative concerning its national security, identity, and international status. The war in Ukraine has triggered a vast machinery of manipulation – of history, current events, and public perception—offering a distorted interpretation of reality in which storytelling has become a key mechanism of state identity. In this framework, strategic narratives function not only as tools of persuasion, but as instruments of power that shape collective memory, justify aggression, and assert Russia's claim to global relevance.

This narrative system is hierarchical: metanarratives portray Russia as a besieged, morally superior civilization; systemic narratives recast the war as defense against Western aggression; and identity narratives frame Ukrainians and Russians as 'one people', delegitimizing Ukraine's sovereignty. Particularly manipulative is the framing of Ukraine as a Nazi state, allowing Russia to invoke WWII memory and justify violence as antifascist liberation. These distortions reverse reality, presenting Russia as victim and liberator, while obscuring responsibility for its actions.

Messages, including claims of Ukrainian war crimes or staged atrocities, are tailored for online disinformation, fueling confusion and cynicism. Russia also promotes a false narrative of seeking peace while blaming the West for prolonging war, using pacifist rhetoric to justify continued aggression. Domestically, these narratives build regime legitimacy and suppress dissent; internationally, they aim to polarize debate, weaken democratic consensus, and sow distrust.

This system is not accidental – it is a coordinated form of psychological warfare designed to reshape perception and challenge liberal democratic norms. Countering it requires more than fact-checking: democratic societies must create emotionally resonant counter-narratives and foster media literacy to build resilience against authoritarian storytelling.

Part IV

Instrumentalisation of migration as a tool of hybrid warfare

This chapter first reviews the evolution of Soviet and Russian 'active measures', showing how forced migration has long been deployed as a hybrid-warfare instrument to destabilize adversaries, then presents the dual-track strategy – the concurrent dissemination of opposing pro- and anti-migration narratives – within a theoretical framework that highlights its polarizing mechanisms and challenges for FIMI detection.

Next, the case study of Egor Putilov – a Russian-born journalist known for spreading opposing political narratives under multiple identities in Sweden – demonstrates dual-track dissemination in practice, before the discussion of synergistic effects examines how simultaneous contradictory frames erode institutional trust, amplify radicalization, and fracture democratic resilience.

The chapter concludes by assessing the Polish-Belarusian border crisis as an empirical example of migration instrumentalisation, mapping tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) used to coordinate migrant flows, narrative waves and disinformation, and by outlining systemic implications and recommendations for cross-institutional monitoring and counter-measures.

Russia has a long history of using **coercive (weaponized) migration** as one of the tools it implements against its adversaries. Already the Soviet approach to forced migration was rooted in the broader doctrine of 'active measures' – offensive operations aligned with Soviet strategic goals[139]. These measures were designed not only for intelligence gathering but also for exerting influence through psychological, political, economic, and social manipulation in adversarial states. Forced migration, or population movement, was part of this broader framework. It was used to destabilize Western societies, weaken anti-communist forces, and generate internal conflicts by exacerbating social tensions. These operations involved undermining democratic institutions, discrediting opposition parties, spreading disinformation, and manipulating political processes in target countries. They also included engineering crises (e.g., migrant flows or humanitarian emergencies) that could be used to exert pressure or justify intervention.

'**Coercive engineered migration**' refers to a state's deliberate orchestration of cross-border population movements to pressure another state or group of states into political, economic, or military concessions. Unlike spontaneous migration due to war or famine, engineered migration manipulates flows intentionally – often using state resources or intelligence services – to destabilize or extract leverage from target countries[140]. A classic historical example of such tactics was the 1980 Mariel Boatlift from Cuba to Miami that was orchestrated by Soviet

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[139] S. Hosaka, *Repeating History: Soviet Offensive Counterintelligence Active Measures…*op.cit.

[140] M. Wojnowski, *The Genesis, Theory, and Practice of Russian Coercive Migration Engineering. A Contribution to the Study of the Migration Crisis on NATO's Eastern Flank*. „Internal Security Review", 2022, no. 14(26), p. 264–265.

Union[141]. By suddenly allowing mass emigration – Cuba, under Fidel Castro rule, overwhelmed US authorities, increasing social and economic strain, and creating a narrative of chaos. The influx strained resources, altered public perceptions of migrants, and even provided cover for intelligence assets[142].

More broadly, the KGB sought to exploit divisions within Western societies (e.g., between governments and their populations or between different ethnic and political groups) by amplifying polarisation and social unrest. Migration could thus be weaponized to weaken trust, provoke nationalist backlash, and create a climate of fear and instability – making it a useful instrument in the broader Soviet strategy of weakening the West from within without resorting to open military confrontation.

In the context of its politics *vis a vis* the EU the most significant examples include:

- first, increased forced migration from Syria to Europe after Russian intervention in the conflict in 2015-2016,

- second, actively encouraging the population of the Middle Eastern states to use Russian or Belarussian territory to reach the EU since 2021.

Enforcing migration comes with more than just kinetic threat and efforts to disrupt the EU institutions and stability through the sudden and significant population movement. It is accompanied by stories and narratives aimed at undermining EU image and reliability of its policies among its member states and its normative character as a human rights observing organisation in its neighbourhood and globally.

Such a phenomenon is defined as instrumentalization of migration (IM). It assumes using migrants as a tool that can be easily exploited by a state with otherwise limited strategic or political leverage to facilitate their movements across borders (with the different levels of enforcement) to destabilise or subjugate the target country[143]. Additionally, migration instrumentalisation is a low-cost strategy, given that (potential) migrants are already motivated to leave the country of their residence due to multiple push factors ranging from the dimensions of security, economy and stability. People's movement organised in such a way can influence political decisions, social coherence and polarisation, security and economy of the target state and its international prestige in multiple way[144]. As such, migrants are therefore used as a foreign policy tool.

According to Kelly M. Greenhill, this may serve political, territorial, economic and military goals and is applied by both state and non-state actors. She defines four subtypes of IM:

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[141] A. Larzelere, *Castro's Ploy-America's Dilemma: The 1980 Cuban Boatlift*, Washington 1988, p. XXXI-XXXII; United States Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, Role of Cuba in International Terrorism and Subversion, Washington 1982, p. 162.

[142] M. Wojnowski, *The Genesis*…op. cit., p. 269-271.

[143] A. Fahry, R. Parkes, A. Racz, *Migration Instrumentalization: A Taxonomy For an Efficient Response*, Hybrid CoE Working Paper 14, March 2022, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/20220308-Hybrid-CoE-WP-14-Migration-instrumentalization-WEB.pdf [last access: 14.07.2025].

[144] Y. Lysenko, *The Process of Instrumentalisation of Migrants At the EU's Eastern Borders in the 21st Century*, Copernicus, 11.09.2024, https://coopernicus.pl/knowledge/the-process-of-instrumentalisation-of-migrants-at-the-eus-eastern-borders-in-the-21st-century, [last access: 14.07.2025].

1) coercive,

2) dispossessive,

3) exportive and

4) militarily engineered[145].

These four types define the way in which state or non-state actors organise the IM process. Coercive instrumentalisation involves using migratory flows to pressure a target state into changing its policies, often by overwhelming border capacities and provoking political instability. Dispossessive strategies aim to forcibly displace populations, typically through violence or coercion, to serve the interests of the actor behind the displacement. Exportive instrumentalisation encourages or facilitates the emigration of specific groups, either to weaken a rival state or to attract desirable human capital. Lastly, militarized approaches incorporate migration into broader military strategies, such as deploying individuals into a target area to act as a destabilizing force or a covert support network.

Within this context, in Russian military and strategic thinking, particularly as outlined by general Aleksandr Vladimirov, migration is seen as a deliberate tool of geopolitical influence. In his 2012 monograph[146], he describes war as a broad system of managing global affairs, where armed conflict is just one method. Within this framework, forced migration – referred to as 'streams' or 'human flows' – is used to destabilize adversaries and secure long-term strategic advantages. Migration is further framed as a form of asymmetric aggression – an invasion that places native populations in a position where they must fight to preserve their existence. In this view, uncontrolled inflows of foreign ethnic groups are expected to provoke nationalist backlash, social unrest, and ultimately the dismantling of liberal democratic institutions. This, in turn, may facilitate the resurgence of authoritarianism or even fascism, further fracturing the political landscape of Europe.

From a tactical standpoint, mass migration is considered a strategic weapon capable of disrupting states without traditional military confrontation. Orchestrating migratory flows can undermine nation's political, economic, and territorial integrity by dissolving borders, collapsing governance structures, and eroding national culture and values. For Russian military thinkers, this weaponized approach to migration represents one of the most effective tools of modern hybrid warfare, targeting not only state security but the very identity and continuity of nations[147]. This approach treats migration not as a humanitarian issue, but as a mechanism to challenge the internal security and cohesion of rival states, especially in Europe[148].

Modern Russian doctrine blurs the line between war and peace, employing a spectrum of tools – economic, informational, and migratory – alongside military force. Forced migration is now classified as a non-military means to destabilize adversaries, especially in the 'gray zone' of

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[145] K.M. Greenhill, *Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War*, „Civil Wars", 2008, No. 10, p. 6-21.

[146] A. Vladimirov, *Основы общей теории войны. Часть I: Основы теории войны*, Москва 2012.

[147] See more: M.R. D'Alessandro, *Defining and Understanding the Gray Zone*, "Naval War College Review" 2021, vol. 74, no. 3, pp 16-17, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss3/6 [last access: 13.07.2025]; R. Kupiecki, *Zagrożenia i wojny hybrydowe – studia strategiczne w pułapce metafory i wyobraźni*, in: K. Pronińska, A. Bieńczyk-Missala (eds.), "Horyzonty studiów strategicznych", Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw 2023, pp. 115–136.

[148] M. Wojnowski, *The Genesis…*op. cit., p. 282-284.

conflict[149]. Humanitarian rhetoric is weaponized by Russia to justify interventions or deflect criticism[150]. By invoking international norms – such as protecting minorities or responding to crises – Russia can mask destabilizing operations as altruistic, complicating international responses[151].

With 65,000 km of coastline, 14,000 km of land borders, 300 airports, and overseas territories extending into Africa, Latin America, and Asia, the EU has become increasingly susceptible to this type of migratory influence. Actors which used IM against the EU involve not only Russia, but also Turkey, Libyan mercenaries, ISIS and northern African states. Within the last decade one of the most influential IM operations against the EU was Russian intervention in Syria. It marked Russia's direct military presence in the EU southern neighbourhood. It allowed Russia not only to increase its influence on the politics of other Middle Eastern states, but also to affect the European security environment from both – Eastern and Southern directions given the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine that started in 2014.

The beginning of Russian military involvement in Syria coincided with gradually increasing numbers of Syrians crossing the Mediterranean through different routes in order to apply for asylum status in Europe. General Breedlove's testimony specifically indicated that Russian and Assad regime bombings, especially of civilian areas, aimed to create mass displacement. This influx of refugees put immense pressure on EU institutions, stoking internal divisions and challenging border security[152]. Migration waves from Syria together with Russian FIMI fuelled political polarisation and anti-EU sentiment within the member states.

Nevertheless, Russian operation in Syria was one of the main drivers of migration to the EU and Russian FIMI concerning migration against the EU proves that intervention in Syria was useful for it also in the IM dimension. Therefore, even if Russian primary intention was to save Bashar al-Assad and consolidate its position vis a vis Israel and Turkey-it has strategically used the resulting refugee flows as a tool to pressure the EU and its member states[153]. The tactics used by the Russian military in Syria – the scorched-earth methods against residential areas and civilian objects – further increased the motivation for trying to reach Europe, while Russian military presence in Syria allowed it to control the migration stream. 2015 marked the record number of irregular EU borders crossings and was dominated by the migrants arriving from Syria. According to UNHCR data in 2015 1,000,573 people arrived in Europe through the Mediterranean while around half a million of them were Syrians[154] and the peak of the numbers

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[149] A.K. Šarapov, *Характеристика отдельных геополитических технологий, применяемых в современном геополитическом процессе*, „Вестник Забайкальского государственного университета" 2015, nr 4, p 103-104. In official documents such as the 2014 'Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation' and the so-called 'Gerasimov Doctrine', Russia presents information, economic, political and migration activities as threats against itself. At the same time, these same measures are treated as tools that Russia actively uses against other states. Both Russia and Belarus employ a mechanism referred to as the 'mirror principle' - a strategy of attributing to opponents actions that it itself undertakes, see: A.M. Dyner, *The mirror principle in assessing hybrid threats emanating from Russia and Belarus*, "Internal Security Review", 2023, 15(29), p. 39–62.

[150] Ibidem, p. 105-106.

[151] M. Wojnowski, *The Genesis…*op. cit., p. 280

[152] *Statement of General Philip M. Breedlove, USAF, Commander, U.S. European Command and Supreme Allied Commander, Europe*, in: United States Senate. Committee on Armed Services. Hearing to Receive Testimony of United States European Command, Tuesday, March 1, 2016, Washington 2016, p. 13-14, 17, 72-77.

[153] U. Kivanc, *Testing Turkey's State Capacity: The Syrian Migration Crisis as Catalyst*, "European Journal of Migration and Law", 23, no 2 (2021), p. 152-175.

[154] J. Clayton, H. Holland, T. Gaynor, *Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe in 2015*, UNHCR, https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/over-one-million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015 [last access: 14.07.2025].

of asylum applications per month was noted in the last 2-3 months of that same year, quickly after the Russian operation began in September 2015.

Given that at the time European states already faced the growing radicalisation of opinions regarding migration and strengthening of the right wing parties which used anti-migration messages to build their legitimacy through undermining Union's policies, Russian actions provided these actors with "facts on the ground". The narratives that amplify goals of IM focus on emphasising problems that undermine trust in public institutions, decision makers' competencies and intentions[155]. They also aim to stir social divisions and polarisation. Achieving this leads to weakening the sense of security among the citizens and establishment of the target states. Russian (and pro-Russian actors') narratives on migration often presented the EU abiding by the laws regulating how refugees should be treated and its politics open to migration from the southern neighbourhood, as threatening the security and stability of Europe and as an existential threat to the Christian European culture. The end goal here was to make limiting migration essential and necessary, even if it meant breaking international law and implementing tools that were in clear contradiction with the asylum regulations and that would endanger irregular migrants and refugees' lives.

Chart 9. Competing Narratives in Response to Instrumentalisation of Migration
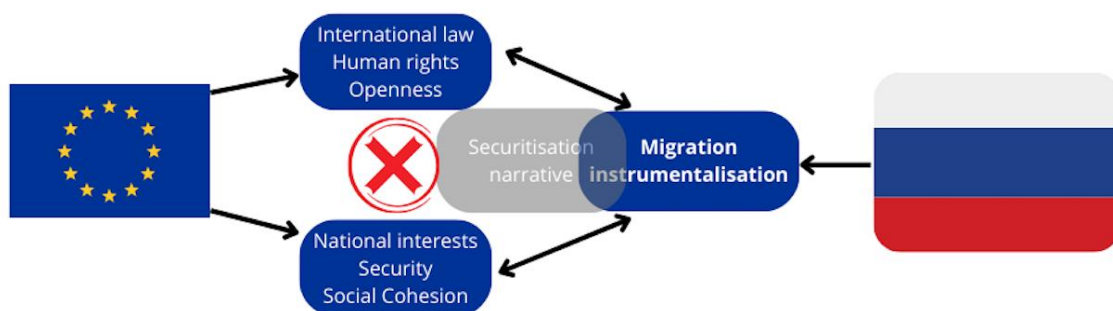
Source: *own study*

Thus, this strategy assumed using international law especially against the countries which up until now put abiding by it, as the core of their political identity. As such the EU, whose identity was built on respect for human rights, became a perfect target entity for this strategy. The combination of IM and legal and moral obligation created a paradoxical internal contradiction, whereas the EU approach to international and human rights obliged it to protect refugees and respect migrants rights, but in view of narratives spread by Russia and far right European parties, such behaviour was interpreted as against the national interests, such as protecting borders and citizens of the European states. Such a goal of Russian facilitation of migration to the EU was also confirmed in Vladimirov's work, where he stated that success of using IM as part of the hybrid warfare depends heavily on exploiting specific cultural and psychological traits of liberal democracies – namely, the tendency toward compassion, sympathy for the weak, and the resentment of the powerless against the powerful. These elements, according to Russian

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[155] R. Gonczi, *The Greenhill Approach and the Taxology of Instrumentalized Migration in the Belarusian Migration Crisis*, Warsaw Institute, 22.07.2024, p. 7.
https://warsawinstitute.org/the-greenhill-approach-and-the-taxology-of-instrumentalized-migration-in-the-belarusian-migration-crisis/ [last access: 14.07.2025].

strategic thinking, can be manipulated to lower resistance to migratory pressure and paralyze decisive action. By leveraging Western humanitarian values such as dignity, solidarity, and respect for international law. Russian tactics aim to trigger predictable and generous responses from European institutions, thus weaponizing compassion itself. This exploitation of EU humanitarian norms allows migration to serve as both a political wedge and a strategic disruptor[156]. After 2015/16 so called migration crisis, the EU and its member states, found themselves facing this dilemma which limited their capacity for quick decision making process and reaction to emergencies[157].

One of the most significant examples of how Russia applied this strategy was the so-called 'Lisa case' in Germany. Lisa was a Russian-German 13 year old girl who disappeared one afternoon in January 2016 and after she was found, it was reported that she was raped by the Arab men. This led to multiple protests across the country against accepting Arab and muslim migrants and dominated German public debate for weeks, even though the reported story turned out to be false[158].

Another good example was an intensification of migrants' movement to Norway and Finland from Russia between 2015 and 2016. Majority of those who arrived in Finland where they applied for asylum did not come directly from the country of conflict (in most cases – Syria) but before they spent a significant amount of time in Russia[159]. Moscow's facilitation and regulation of the migration route through Russia to Finland was likely a calculated move by the Russian authorities, intended to pressure Helsinki into pushing for a normalization of EU-Russia relations and to discourage deeper cooperation with NATO and increased involvement in regional affairs.

Security agencies coordinated logistics, selected transit routes, and sometimes embedded agents among migrants. During the Finnish border crisis, Russian FSB border guards directed the timing and composition of groups crossing into Finland, maximizing political impact. Russia suddenly relaxed border controls, allowing thousands of migrants from third countries to cross into Finland at remote Arctic checkpoints. This unexpected surge overwhelmed Finnish services and stoked domestic debate, ultimately pushing Helsinki toward diplomatic concessions[160].

4.1. Discourse analysis/interpretive framework

The development of FIMI narratives in the context of migration could be divided into two phases. The first is focused on migration securitisation which became the foundation for the alliance between Russia and right wing European parties from around 2015[161]. This phase started with the gradual increase in the number of immigrants from the MENA region in Europe

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[156] M. Wojnowski, *The Genesis…*op.cit., p. 284-285.

[157] R. Gonczi, *The Greenhill Approach…*.op.cit., p. 8

[158] S. Meister, *The "Lisa Case": Germany As a Target of Russian Disinformation*, "NATO Review", July 25, 2016,https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html [last access: 14.07.2025].

[159] P. Szymański, P. Żachowski, W. Rodkiewicz, *Wymuszanie współpracy: fińsko-rosyjski kryzys migracyjny*, „Analizy OSW", 6.04.2016 https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-04-06/wymuszanie-wspolpracy-finsko-rosyjski-kryzys-migracyjny [last access: 14.07.2025].

[160] M. Wojnowski, *The Genesis…*op.cit., p. 290-292.

[161] See: A. Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, Routlege, London 2017.

since the mass demonstrations in the Arab world in 2011 and developed well into 2021, when the second phase took over. The researchers belonging to Copenhagen school (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde) which focused on non-military aspects of security, define securitisation as a speech act within which an actor using securitisation defines a certain phenomenon as a threat to the target audience and promotes exceptional measures as necessary to counter this threat. This process is seen as successful if the problem described by a securitising actor becomes widely seen as a security issue by the target audience[162]. Just as in the case of the MI, the securitisation speech act can be performed by both – state and non-state actors, however the securitising actor must be characterised by a certain level of authority. Therefore, from the Russian perspective it was crucial to have local political actors as the amplifiers of the narrative Russia wanted to promote.

The aim of both – Russia and European far right parties – was to influence the attitude of the EU population in the way that would undermine trust for the EU institutions and normalise behaviour and response to irregular migration which until then was considered unacceptable due to ethical and legal reasons. This faced the EU government with the dilemma between ethical and legal standards and what was advertised as national interests (security from alien culture and terrorism, border control). The majority of the European governments chose to abandon refugees-related international law when faced with the growing popularity with the right-wing parties' messaging. This facilitated achieving one of the Russian goals – undermining EU self-conception as a normative power, based on respect for human rights and freedoms, which created a fertile ground for realizing objectives of the IM operation that started around 2020/21 by Belarus and Russia.

At that time, during the Operation Lock, Belarus and Russia intensified narratives focusing on how the Eastern European states break international law while their actions lead to migrants' death. This instrumentalization of migration creates a fundamental challenge for democratic societies. Overly harsh responses can violate human rights and undermine democratic legitimacy. Balancing security with humanitarian obligations remains a core challenge, especially as adversaries adapt their tactics.

FIMI operations during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border were cyclical in nature, and linked to significant political events. This particularly underlines their role as an element of hybrid operations[163]. The first wave occurred in mid-November 2021, when there was a massive attempt to push through the Kuźnica border crossing, resulting in a surge of migrants and media coverage of drastic situations at the fence[164]. The second wave involved telephone conversations between Chancellor Angela Merkel and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (15-17 September 2021), after which the two sides announced negotiations on 'humanitarian problems' and support for migrants, which the Belarusian regime used to legitimise its own narratives of alleged 'caring' Belarus[165]. The third wave came in

[162] M. Kabata, A. Jacobs, *The 'Migrant Other' As a Security Threat: the 'Migration Crisis' and the Securitising Move of the Polish Ruling Party in Response to the EU Relocation Scheme*, "Journal of Contemporary European Studies" 31, No. 4 (2023), p. 1223–1239.

[163] *Russian and Belarusian Disinformation*, „InfoWarfare.pl", 06.12.2023, https://infowarfare.pl/2023/12/06/emil-czeczko-russian-and-belarusian-disinformation/ [last access: 14.07.2025].

[164] *Belarusian Forces Stoke Migrant Influx in Poland, Lithuania*, „BBC News", 03.11.2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59302919, [last access: 14.07.2025].

[165] P. Reevell, *Lukashenko and Merkel discuss Belarus-Poland border crisis in hopes it can be stopped*, „ABC News",https://abcnews.go.com/ABCNews/lukashenko-merkel-discuss-belarus-poland-migrant-crisis-hopes/story?id=81240721 [last access: 14.07.2025]; *No Migrant Ssharing Deals in Merkel-Lukashenko Calls,*

conjunction with the desertion of Polish soldier Emil Czeczko in December 2021, who subsequently accused Poland of mass execution of migrants, and his statements were widely disseminated by the Belarusian state media[166].

4.2. The concept of FIMI Dual-Track Strategy

The dual-track strategy in FIMI entails a single actor – or a small coalition of actors – simultaneously advancing two directly opposing narratives about the same issue to maximise societal polarisation. This framework comprises three core elements:

1. Simultaneous antagonistic narratives: an adversary deploys one narrative promoting a given stance targeting group X and, under a different identity, an antithetical narrative targeting group Y;

2. Polarisation mechanisms as a strategic objective: the explicit aim is not to persuade audiences toward one side, but to entrench the "us versus them" binary. By exploiting cognitive biases (e.g. in-group/out-group heuristics) and echo-chamber dynamics, dual-track campaigns manufacture conflict, erode institutional legitimacy and poison decision-making;

3. Implications for FIMI analysis: conventional detection tools seek coherence within a single narrative stream and typically monitor cross-posting or synchronized thematic spikes by monitoring online platforms. Dual-track operations defeat these methods by segmenting account networks and platform usage, and sometimes also through the use of completely separate channels of communication, e.g. influence operations carried out by an agent or private companies under contract. Segmented CIB networks promote each narrative in isolated clusters of fake, duplicated or compromised accounts[167].

   - Narratives are channelled through distinct platforms (e.g. one narrative on Twitter, the other in closed messaging groups), evading single-spectrum coordination flags.

   - Agents of influence introduce narratives A and B via separate ecosystems, later relying on organic amplification by real users before re-injecting them into the mainstream, further obscuring the original operation.

Lithuanian President Says, „LRT", https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1547930/no-migrant-sharing-deals-in-merkel-lukashenko-calls-lithuanian-president-says[last access: 14.07.2025]; *Telefonnyy razgovor s i o kanclera Germanii Angeloy Merkel*, President of Belarus, https://president.gov.by/en/events/telefonnyy-razgovor-s-i-o-kanclera-germanii-angeloy-merkel-1637044964 [last access: 14.07.2025].

[166] *Polish Soldier Who Sought Asylum In Belarus Found Dead In Minsk*, „RFE/RL", https://www.rferl.org/a/poland-soldier-belarus-asylum-dead/31758266.html [last access: 14.07.2025];

S. Żaryn, *Białoruska propaganda znów użyła rewelacji dezertera przeciwko Polsce*, „WP Wiadomości", https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/bialoruska-propaganda-znow-uzyla-rewelacji-dezertera-przeciwko-polsce-6735976857389856a [last access: 14.07.2025]

[167] K. O'Halloran, C. Aragon, *Measuring Information Disorder: Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Debunking...*, „Frontiers in Sociology", 2023, vol. 8, https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sociology/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1141416/full, [last access: 14.07.2025].

Because platform architectures foster discrete narrative ecosystems, dual-track campaigns leverage platform-specific affordances – filter bubbles, algorithmic recommendations and moderation gaps – to reinforce each pole. Truth Social, Bluesky and Mastodon studies demonstrate that, despite discussing identical topics, each platform develops radically different framings and engagement patterns, underscoring the need for cross-platform, concurrent monitoring of contradictory narratives and cooperation and coordination between relevant state security authorities[168].

4.3. Typologies and mechanisms of dissemination FIMI narratives related to migration instrumentalisation

In this subchapter the narratives related to the IM have been systematised according to their thematic focus and rhetorical function, providing for a more precise analysis of how disinformation campaigns target different segments of the public. The typology distinguishes between identity, problem, and systemic narratives, each reflecting distinct mechanisms of influence. *Identity narratives* construct a dichotomy between an imagined collective self (e.g. national, cultural, or religious identity) and an externalised 'other', typically migrants or their perceived allies. *Problem narratives* seek to link migration to specific social, economic, or security issues, thereby framing it as the root cause of broader systemic dysfunction. *Systemic narratives* place migration within a larger geopolitical framework.

Table 4 presents a consolidated overview of these narratives disseminated during the 2021–2022 migration crisis at the Belarusian–EU border. Each entry is categorised by narrative type, number of documented mentions, and associated messages. This typology not only illustrates the breadth and diversity of messaging employed by Russian and Belarusian FIMI operations, but also highlights the strategic emphasis on identity-based narratives—particularly those portraying Belarus as a humanitarian actor and EU border states as human rights violators.

Table 5. Narrative types used during 2021-2022 border crisis

	Narratives	Type	Mentions	Messages	Mentions
1.	***Anti-migrant narratives***	Systemic	**3**	*Europe is being overwhelmed by uncontrolled migration*	1
				Refugees or migrants are inherently criminal or violent	2
2.	***Belarus is a humanitarian victim, unfairly***	Identity	**67**	*Belarus provides food and shelter; claims of "weaponised migration" are a Western myth*	31

168 L. Sanchez et al., *ICWSM 2025 Workshop Proceedings*, 2025, https://workshop-proceedings.icwsm.org/pdf/2025_42.pdf [last access: 14.07.2025].

	blamed for the crisis			*Minsk is reacting to EU sanctions, not creating the crisis*	17
				The "hybrid attack" narrative is EU propaganda to deflect from its own abuses	41
				Visa-free policy proves Belarus's openness and humanitarian stance	1
3.	*EU border states commit atrocities against migrants*	Identity	**80**	*Polish and Lithuanian guards beat, rob, and torture refugees at the frontier*	32
				Push-backs, electric shocks, and dog attacks make the EU a human-rights abuser	46
				Dead migrants are buried in secret mass graves in the forest	8
				Treatment of migrants at EU border shows Europe doesn't follow its own 'human rights' standards	1
4.	*The West manufactured the border crisis as a pretext for aggression*	Problem	**36**	*Poland invented the crisis to justify military build-up*	24
				Lithuania uses migration narratives to invite NATO escalation	12
				The West stages the spectacle to keep sanctions and threaten Belarus/Russia	24
				Other	2

Source: *own study based on the data from the Debunk.org*

4.3.1. Systematisation of Narratives Aimed at Audiences Opposed to Migration or Viewing Migration as a Security Threat

Identity narratives used in disinformation campaigns about migration construct stories about a threatened collectivity – a nation, civilisation or cultural community – allegedly under attack by a 'foreign intruder'. At the core of this construction is a sharp moral-axiological division: 'we' (the nation, Europe, Christian civilisation) as victims and 'they' (migrants, Muslims, cultural strangers) as a threat, often supported by 'traitorous elites'[169]. In this view, migration is woven into a broader narrative of the civilisational conflict between good and evil. Propaganda messages present migrants not only as a specific threat (e.g. crime), but also as a symbol of the imminent collapse of Western values[170].

The information operations surrounding the 2021-2022 crisis on the Belarusian-Polish and Belarusian-Lithuanian borders used these patterns. In Polish and Lithuanian-language social media, migrants were sometimes described as a threat to Christian identity. There were themes of 'displacement; of the native population, 'destruction of values' or 'forced social transformation' – identity narratives constructing an image of a fundamental clash of civilisations[171].

These narratives serve not only to arouse alarmist fears, but also to redefine the political community as fragile and under siege. In effect, they delegitimise state institutions, portraying them as an ally of 'outsiders' against the nation. This mechanism reinforces emotions of fear and anger, activating the need to 'defend identity' by all means[172].

Problem narratives frame migration as the direct source of social, economic or political troubles. Such narratives deliberately spread fear and discontent by blaming "migration policies" or the very presence of migrants and refugees for various ills. This pattern is well documented in disinformation studies. For instance, a Lithuanian disinformation analysis by CRI notes that in the 2021 Belarus–Lithuanian border crisis propaganda, social messages explicitly warned that migrants would "*negatively affect the economy and... put great pressure on Lithuanian finances*" and that resources "*spent on migrants would be better spent for the needs of Lithuanians*"[173]. It also highlights claims that "*people in Lithuania are afraid of migrants*" and resist having them as neighbours. These examples mirror broader findings: European research shows migration disinformation often casts migrants as a threat (to health, security or welfare), e.g. as disease vectors, violent criminals or undeserving welfare

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[169] P. Butcher, A.H. Neidhardt, *Fear and Lying in the EU: Fighting Disinformation on Migration with Alternative Narratives*, „European Policy Centre", 2020, p. 19–20

[170] Ibidem, p. 19-20; *Disinformation on Migration: How Lies, Half-Truths, and Mischaracterizations Spread*, Migration Policy Institute, 2023, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/how-disinformation-fake-news-migration-spreads, [last access: 14.07.2025].

[171] Ibidem, p. 19-20; *Disinformers Use Similar Arguments and Techniques to Steer Hate against Migrants from Ukraine or the Global South*, European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), 2023, https://edmo.eu/publications/disinformers-use-similar-arguments-and-techniques-to-steer-hate-against-migrants-from-ukraine-or-the-global-south-2/ [last access: 14.07.2025].

[172] *Policy Study: Disinformation on Migration*, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), November 26, 2021, https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/downloads/publications/211129policystudydisinformationmigration2021_final_single.pdf, [last access: 14.07.2025].

[173] V. Denisenko, *Migration Crisis On Belarus–EU border 2021: Elements of Information Warfare*. Vilnius: Civic Resilience Initiative, March 2022, pp 5-8, https://cri.lt/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CRI_tyrimas.pdf [last access: 13.07.2025].

recipients[174]. The CRI report and related analyses confirm these narratives are not only circulated but are intended to stoke public fear and resentment[175].

A May 2025 Polish case illustrates how the problem narratives are introduced and how they relate to current events. An axe attack that occurred at the University of Warsaw (UW) campus was accompanied by an immediate, false narrative blaming a "Ukrainian" perpetrator, mainly in the comments section of Facebook, X, Instagram and Tik-Tok. At the same day an anonymous X account, @coolfonpl (appearing as "parody account") shared a composite image – combining an alleged crime-scene photo and a snippet of a comment from Facebook – designed to appear authentic[176]. The post, which garnered over 100 000 views, was amplified by both pro-Kremlin–aligned and domestic anti-system accounts (or impersonating them). While attribution is unproven, the pattern fits known disinformation techniques.

It's important to note that this type of narrations overlap with domestic actors: the same networks often amplify narratives popular with anti-systemic parties, suggesting such disinformation can be used by domestic actors for political profit. Whether @coolfonpl acted as a deliberate FIMI seeder or acted opportunistically, the systematic injection of anti-migrant/anti-Ukrainian narratives – combined with efforts to erode trust in official communications – creates an environment where anti-establishment parties can convert consumers of disinformation into a reliable voter base, securing political advantage.

Overall, these narratives follow a cause–effect–solution structure: e.g. first blame is placed on EU or national migration policy (the cause), which is then said to cause economic/social crises or crimes that threaten the public (the effect), implying that only an 'anti-establishment' change of government or policy can fix things (the solution). Populist actors routinely cast migration as an out of control crisis to trigger fear and then present themselves as the decisive solution. In effect, the problem narrative is instrumentalized for political gain: it exploits real social anxieties (e.g. over jobs, welfare or safety) by exaggerating them into a crisis that supposedly only a "new political order" can resolve.

[174] P. Butcher, A.H., Neidhardt, *Disinformation on Migration: How Lies, Half-Truths, and Mischaracterizations Spread*, Migration Information Source, September 8, 2022, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/how-disinformation-fake-news-migration-spreads, [last access: 14.07.2025].

[175] See also EU analyses of migration narratives, which find that populist messages consistently depict migration as a crisis and position the messenger as "the voice of the people" promising to restore security: *Public Discourse on Migration Shaped by Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories*, European Commission, Joint Research Centre, June 5, 2025, https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/public-discourse-migration-shaped-misinformation-and-conspiracy-theories-2025-06-05_en [last access:14.07.2025]; A. Blasco, B. Cabeza Martinez, R. Icardi, M. Krawczyk, F. Seiger, *Public Perceptions of Fairness in the European Migration and Asylum System: Survey Findings From Eight Countries*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union – Joint Research Centre, 2025, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC141980 [last access: 14.07.2025]; F. Seiger, N. Kajander, A.H. Neidhardt, et. al., *Navigating Migration Narratives: Research Insights and Strategies for Effective Communication*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union – Joint Research Centre, 2025, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC142039 [last access: 14.07.2025].

[176] J. Szyda, *Fake newsy, kłamstwa i ksenofobia. Morderstwo na UW i rosyjska dezinformacja*, „Raport Warszawski", May 9, 2025. https://www.raportwarszawski.pl/artykul/3106%2Cfake-newsy-klamstwa-i-ksenofobia-morderstwo-na-uw-i-rosyjska-dezinformacja [last access: 14.07.2025].

Chart 10. Reach of the "Ukrainian man is responsible for the attack at the University of Warsaw campus" narrative on Polish-language social media in May 2025
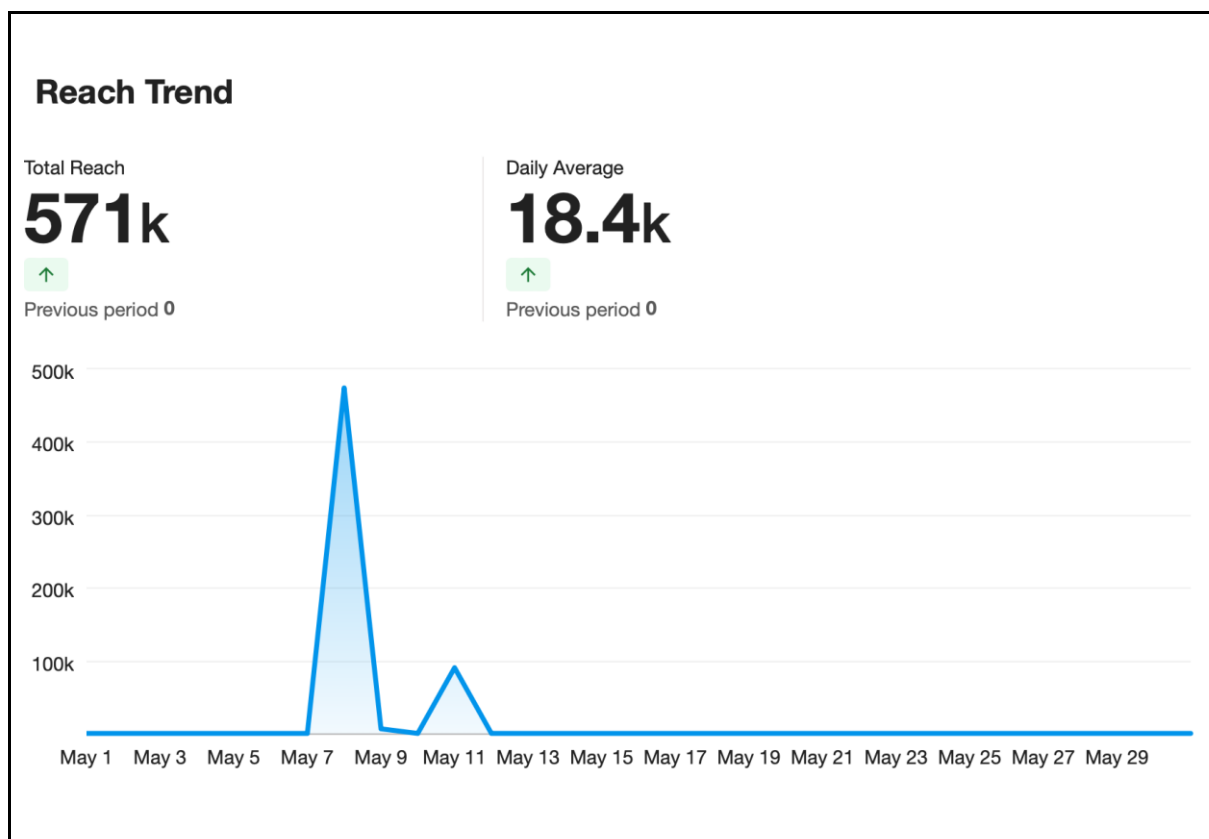
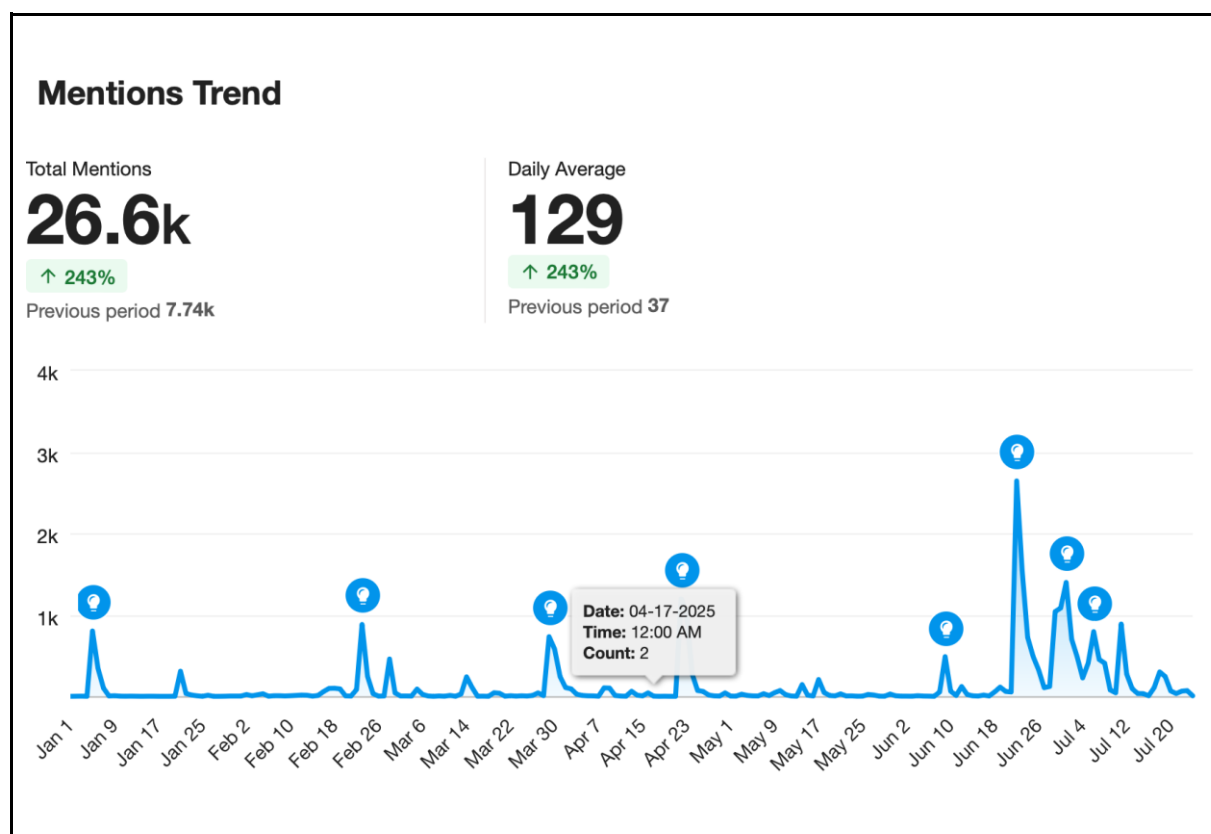Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Systemic narratives in Russian and Belarusian discourse constructs migration as a weapon wielded by the West – specifically the EU and NATO – to destabilise states that resist liberal order. This narrative comprises three interlinked interpretative frames: antagonism between 'the West' and 'sovereign states', delegitimisation of multilateral institutions, and portrayal of migrants as victims in need of Belarusian humanitarian intervention.

In the first frame, migration is characterised as 'Western weaponry' aimed against Belarus and Russia, orchestrated by Brussels and Washington to provoke border crises and erode state sovereignty. Belarusian state media describe charter flights from the Middle East to Minsk followed by forced pushes towards EU frontiers as evidence of Western aggression, asserting that these engineered flows constitute a form of hybrid attack against Minsk and Moscow[177]. There are numerous variations of this narrative frame, e.g. in Polish social media and conspiracy publications it describes migration as a „*weapon of the EU against European nations*", which „*German-controlled Brussels must destroy in order to build a new super-state*". The second frame delegitimises international bodies by depicting the EU as both incompetent and ideologically driven. Reports emphasise alleged failures of EU border management and portray

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[177] A. Yeliseyeu, *Belarus's Coercive Engineered Migration Case of 2021–2022: Categorisation of State Media Narratives,* "Studia Migracyjne - Przegląd Polonijny", No. 3, p. 91. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1242848 [last access: 14.07.2025].

EU institutions as hypocritical for upholding human rights rhetorically while abandoning migrants at the frontier[178].

Chart 11. Number of mentions of the "Migration is an EU or German weapon" narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

The third frame casts migrants as victims of Western inhumanity and elevates the Belarusian regime to the role of humanitarian saviour. State outlets contrast the West's alleged brutality with Belarus's purported care, depicting Minsk's logistics centre on the Polish frontier as a refuge against EU neglect. Rhetorical dichotomies of 'us' versus 'them' reinforce this binary, positioning Belarus and Russia as custodian defenders of shared civilisational values[179].

Underpinning these frames is a triangular narrative structure: West/EU/NATO as perpetrators → migration as the instrument → destabilisation of non-Western states as the objective. This structure exemplifies the adaptation of classical conspiracy tropes to state-centred geopolitical messaging, transforming migration into a strategic lever within information operations. More broadly, it is consistent with Russian disinformation narratives distributed in the Middle East and Africa, where the West is usually pointed to for all crises, conflicts and social inequalities.

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[178] A.M. Dyner, *Crisis on Belarus-Poland Border Exacerbated*, "PISM Spotlight", No. 84, November 9, 2021, https://pism.pl/publications/crisis-on-belarus-poland-border-exacerbated, [last access: 14.07.2025].

[179] A. Yeliseyeu, *Belarus's* Coercive…op. cit., p. 82.

The deployment of these systemic narratives employs three principal tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP). First, **flow engineering** involves coordination of migrant transport to border regions, as evidenced by charter flights from Iraq and Syria to Minsk in mid-2021. Second, **blame-shifting** shifts responsibility for border chaos onto EU capitals, framing Western states as malicious orchestrators of the crisis. Third, **mirror narratives** reflect Western accusations back onto Brussels, accusing the EU of waging a 'hybrid war' against Belarus and Russia through instrumentalization of migration[180].

Temporal synchronization and rapid adaptation characterise distribution patterns. State television channels (e.g., Rossiya-24, BTRC), pro-regime portals and Telegram groups simultaneously amplify identical slogans such as 'weaponisation of migration' precisely when EU policy decisions – such as sanctions or border fortifications – are announced, thereby maximising psychological impact on domestic and international audiences[181].

The Belarus–Poland border crisis of 2021-2022 serves as a case study of these mechanisms. Following Belarus's expulsion of EU-overflight rights and subsequent sanctions, Minsk's engineered migration surge peaked in November 2021 with over 7 500 irregular crossings detected by Frontex, catapulting Belarus onto the EU's primary land-route list[182]. State-controlled media leveraged this situation to demand immediate EU concessions, portraying any refusal as evidence of Western malice and totalitarian ambition.

Russian and Belarusian systemic narratives weaponise migration by integrating conspiracy narrations into state-sponsored information campaigns. The resulting discourse delegitimises Western institutions, polarises target societies and legitimises authoritarian governance under the guise of humanitarian stewardship.

In practice, identity narratives, problem narratives and system narratives are often intertwined and can perform different functions depending on the context. Narratives about the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border were used by the Lukashenko regime to present itself to the Belarusian public as a strong, decisive leader who counts in domestic and international politics. An additional aim was to distract the public's attention from the consequences of the authorities' misguided policy and to identify external enemies responsible for the country's problems

In Russia, narratives on the migration crisis were part of a broader strategy of portraying the West as in crisis and incapable of solving its own problems. In particular, the alleged 'collapse of the European system' was highlighted to legitimise the Kremlin's anti-democratic policies as an alternative to a chaotic and ineffective Western democracy. These narratives aimed to strengthen the legitimacy of the authorities in both Russia and Belarus by creating an image of an external enemy and presenting the current authorities as the only ones capable of protecting citizens from external threats.

Russian and Belarusian FIMI operations on the migration crisis on the EU's eastern border employ linguistic **strategies and eristic mechanisms** aimed to polarize public debate based on an 'us vs. them' dichotomy. This mechanism operates by constructing an antagonistic interpretative framework where each side of the conflict is given opposing axiological attributes. This process exploits cognitive bias exploitation – the systematic recourse to mental

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[180] Ibidem., p. 91.
[181] Ibidem., p. 85, 87-88.
[182] *European Border and Coast Guard Agency Annual Risk Analysis 2022*, Frontex, p. 15.

shortcuts and prejudices that facilitate the adoption of simplistic interpretations of reality. A key eristic technique is the activation of the archetype of invasion, which links migration to narratives of existential threat to the cultural community. This mechanism materialises through the use of military terminology ('invasion', 'occupation', 'conquest') and medical terminology ('epidemic', 'plague'), which gives migration processes a pathological and threatening character. In parallel, there is a religio-civilisational rhetoric using terms such as 'Islamisation', and 'demographic jihad', which construct an image of a fundamental conflict of values. Worth noting, the narrative about the alleged invasion of migrants is currently one of the most popular in the infosphere. Analysis on the Polish-language social media show that currently the total reach of the narrative (between January and July 2025) equals to almost 600 million - with 2.8 million reach daily.

Chart 12. Reach of the "Invasion of migrants" narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025
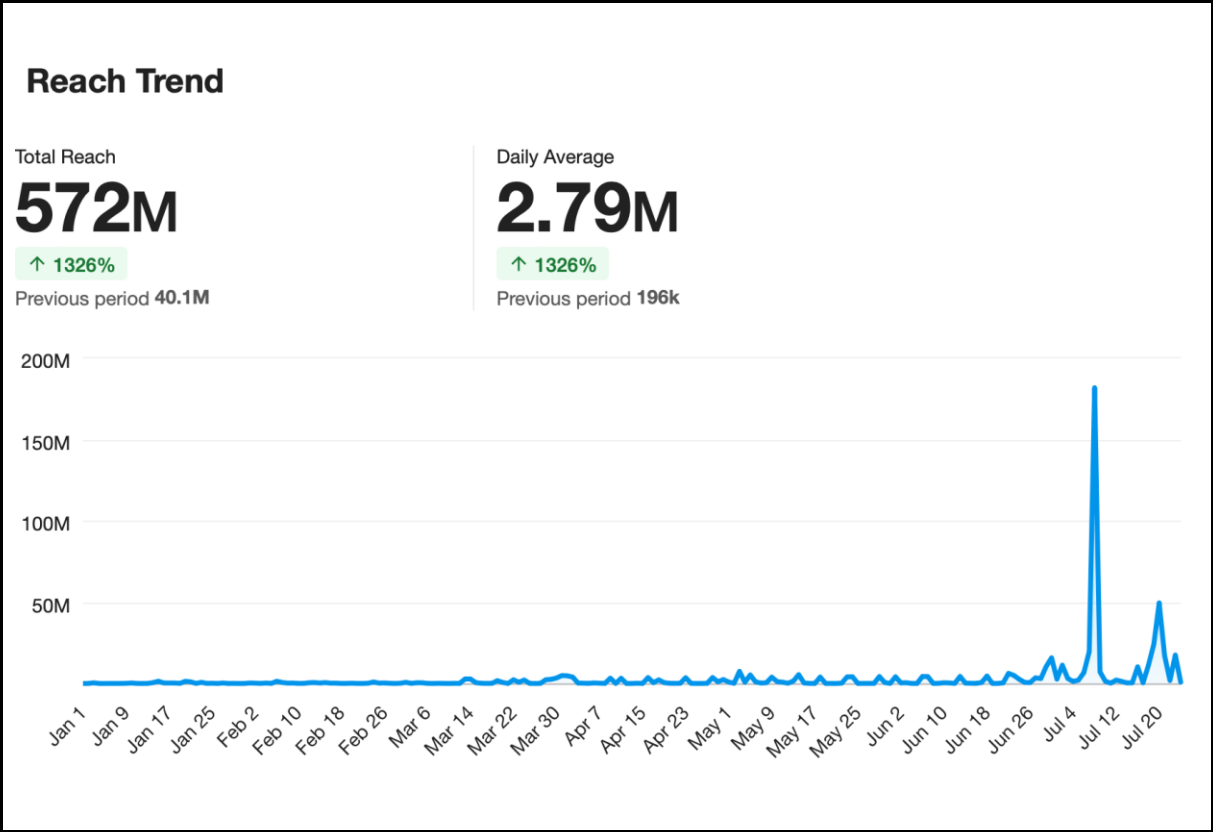
Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

It is also possible to distinguish specific adaptive language strategies and mechanisms of the localisation of narratives that adapt universal patterns to the specificities of individual countries. In the context of Poland, one observes the use of terms such as 'Ukrainisation' or neologisms such as 'ukropolin', which combine migration issues with elements of anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives. The term 'ukropolin' represents a complex conspiracy narrative that merges antisemitic and anti-Ukrainian narratives, alleging that Jews/Israel exploit Ukrainians as instruments to gain control over Poland or to establish a new Ukrainian-Jewish state (there are many contradictory variants of this conspiracy). At the same time, euphemisms and aliases are

used to circumvent the moderation mechanisms of digital platforms – terms such as 'engineers', 'doctors', for example, normalise exclusionary discourse through apparent satire while masking racist elements. Through the use of such wording, networks of inauthentic social media accounts constantly distributing Russian disinformation can easily impersonate supporters of anti-systemic, right-wing political parties and manipulate the discourse of these communities, their self-reflection, and external perceptions.

Chart 13. Number of the Ukrainisation of Poland narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025

Mentions Trend

Total Mentions
87.2k
↑ 78%
Previous period **49k**

Daily Average
425
↑ 78%
Previous period **239**

Date: 03-24-2025
Time: 12:00 AM
Count: 306
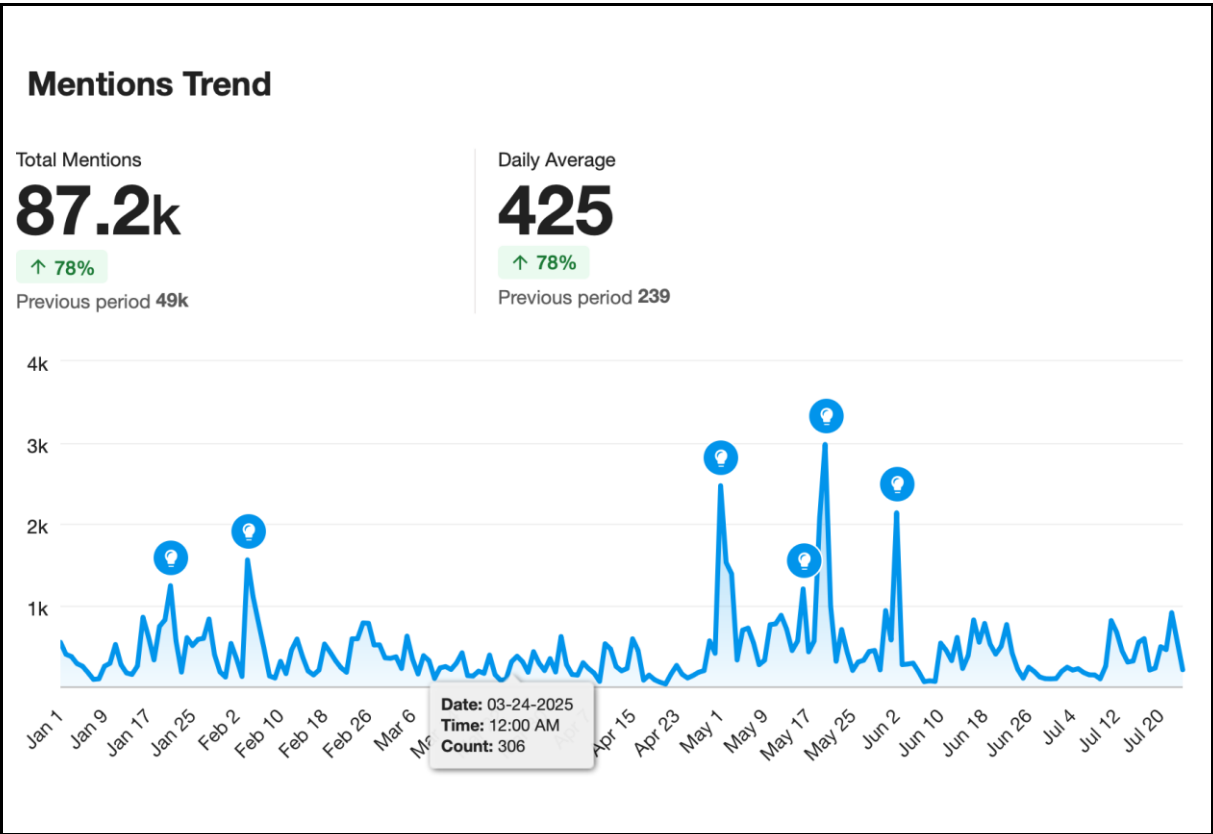
Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

These narratives sometimes have the function of delegitimising state authorities, public institutions, and traditional media, through the construction of narratives about 'traitors to their own nations', using populist rhetoric to undermine trust in democratic institutions by portraying them as tools of secret external manipulation, such as *„Brussels seeking to weaken nation states* or a *global conspiracy seeking to destroy Christian civilisation"* – by migration.

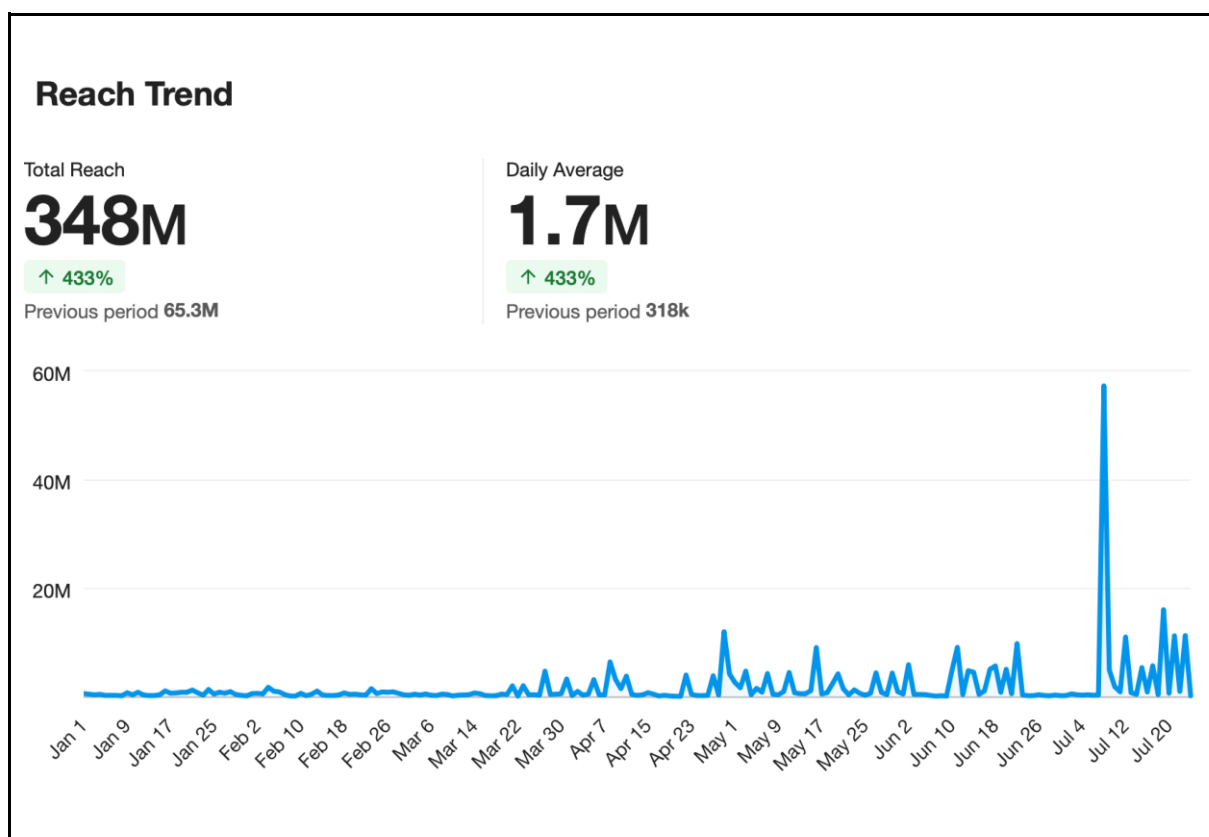**Chart 14. Reach of the Ukrainisation of Poland narrative on Polish-language social media between January and July 2025**

Reach Trend

Total Reach
348M
↑ 433%
Previous period **65.3M**

Daily Average
1.7M
↑ 433%
Previous period **318k**

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

4.3.2. Narratives aimed at pro-immigration and humanitarian audiences

Disinformation narratives targeting individuals and organisations offering assistance during the EU's Eastern border crisis employ human rights discourse as a tool of social polarisation. The primary aim is to delegitimise protection efforts at the EU's external borders by normalising irregular migration and encouraging extra-legal activities, including aiding and abetting illegal border crossings[183]. The mechanisms of polarisation rely on an 'us vs. them' dichotomy, where 'them' includes not only anti-migration actors but also politicians, institutions, border services, and security measures. This framing allows any form of border control to be portrayed as an act of violence and oppression[184].

An analysis of 89 disinformation incidents reports[185] from 2021 to 2024 confirms the dominance of **identity-based narratives** over other types of messaging in the context of the migration crisis at the Belarusian-Polish border. The majority of documented incidents (80 cases) accused EU border states of violating human rights, whereas traditional anti-migration

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[183] *Disinformation offensive*, Polish Minister Coordinator for Intelligence, December 17, 2021, https://www.gov.pl/web/special-services/disinformation-strike [last access: 14.07.2025]; *Belarus KGB set up fake social media accounts to inflame migrants*, „Al Jazeera", 02.12.2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/2/belarus-kgb-set-up-fake-social-media-accounts-to-inflame-migrants, [last access: 14.07.2025].

[184] *Disinformation as a tool of hybrid warfare at the Polish–Belarusian border*, „Warsaw Institute", 07.2024, https://warsawinstitute.org/disinformation-as-a-tool-of-hybtid-warfare-at-the-polish-belarusian-border/ [last access: 14.07.2025].

[185] Based on data provided by Debunk.org.

80

narratives appeared only marginally (2 cases). Conversely, in reports on narratives distributed through the Russian media ecosystem, anti-migration messages predominated.

The actions of EU states to protect their borders were portrayed as violations of international law and human rights. In particular, push-back practices, i.e. turning back migrants in the border zone, were attacked. While these actions were genuinely controversial from the point of view of international law, they were instrumentalised by Russia and Belarus, which themselves created the situation leading to their use. At the same time, the information operations of Russia and Belarus targeting this group were mainly based on **emotional messages**, e.g. depicting the suffering of women and children in isolation from the context of the perpetrator of this suffering – the Belarusian KGB.

A key rhetorical strategy of Belarussian and Russian FIMI operation based on already existing concepts and discourse, mainly referring to border abolitionism, which advocates the complete dismantling of the border control system as a source of violence and a tool of oppression against migrants. This concept understands borders as a 'confinement continuum' – a continuum of incarceration extending beyond physical barriers into the broader everyday experiences of migrants[186]. Within this context, human rights discourse frames the right to migrate as a fundamental human right that supersedes the state's right to territorial control[187]. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights has argued that „the right to leave any country is enshrined in most core human rights instruments and is meant to guarantee freedom of movement without undue interference"[188]. Such messaging has been disseminated using slogans like 'no one is illegal' and 'abolish Frontex'.

In response to the state-sponsored migration orchestrated by Belarus, Polish authorities established a 3-kilometre exclusion zone along the Belarusian border, restricting access for journalists and humanitarian organisations seeking to document the humanitarian situation. The Polish Supreme Court ruled these restrictions 'unconstitutional', emphasising that the Constitution guarantees both 'freedom of movement' and 'freedom to gather and disseminate information'[189]. These restrictions were then incorporated into disinformation narratives as proof that the Polish authorities were allegedly concealing human rights abuses, although their actual purpose was to protect the border from the instrumentalisation of migrants by the Lukashenko regime. It is reasonable to consider that **the withdrawal of state institutions** from certain areas (e.g., humanitarian aid, media access) created a vacuum that was quickly filled by NGOs and grassroots movements. Indeed, it was only after state authorities refused to provide humanitarian assistance and closed the border zone to journalists that bottom-up initiatives emerged in both areas.

During the humanitarian crisis in the 2021-2022 Polish-Belarusian border region, many NGOs, informal groups and local initiatives were active, focusing on helping migrants, protecting human rights and documenting violations of the law, e.g. Grupa Granica. The Grupa Granica network organises protest camps, direct actions, and anti-deportation campaigns, coordinating

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[186] M. Tazzioli, N. De Genova, *Border Abolitionism: Analytics/Politics*, „Social Text", 2023, vol. 41(3), p. 1–34.

[187] *The Right to Leave a Country*, Council of Europe, Commissioner for Human Rights, Strasbourg 2013; M. Perolini, *Limited Tools for Emancipation? Human Rights and Border Abolition*, „Sociology", 2024, vol. 58(2), p. 386–402.

[188] *The Right to Leave…*op.cit.

[189] *Poland's Supreme Court Slams Government for Restricting Media Access at Belarus Border*, „Euronews", January 20, 2022, https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/20/poland-s-supreme-court-slams-government-for-restricting-media-access-at-belarus-border [last access: 14.07.2025].

the efforts of autonomous organisations, groups, and individuals. The distribution channels and operational activities of Russian and Belarusian FIMI targeted the social media environment and informal communication of activists (e.g. Facebook and Whatsapp groups). The members of these organisations mostly acted from humanitarian motives, and the intention of the Belarusian and Russian services was to radicalise them and hit their image. Another social movement active during the migration crisis were organisations linked to the Abolish Frontex initiative, which directly spreads narratives that coincide with the interests of Russia and Belarus[190]. The **Abolish Frontex** campaign calls for the *„dismantling of the border-industrial complex and the building of a society where people are free to move and live"*[191].

The **Belarusian KGB** has utilised fake social media accounts posing as journalists and activists to disseminate content critical of Polish authorities[192]. In December 2021, Meta removed 41 Facebook accounts, five groups, and four Instagram accounts linked to the Belarusian KGB that primarily targeted audiences in the Middle East and Europe during the border crisis. These operations deployed artificial intelligence to generate profile images and published content in multiple languages (English, Polish, and Kurdish), sharing photos and videos of Polish border guards allegedly violating migrants' rights[193].

Russian and Belarusian propaganda exploited the false statements of Emil Czeczko, a Polish soldier who defected to Belarus in December 2021 and appeared in state media accusing Poland of mass executions of migrants[194]. Czeczko claimed that he had been „forced to kill people" while serving at the Polish-Belarusian border. However, subsequent investigations revealed that Czeczko had been facing criminal charges in Poland for drug-related offenses and domestic violence against his mother prior to his defection, indicating that his flight to Belarus was motivated by an attempt to evade legal consequences rather than genuine whistleblowing. The use of humanitarian narratives by Russia and Belarus aims not only to weaken border control directly, but also to undermine the credibility of legitimate humanitarian organisations and activists by associating their actions with disinformation campaigns.

4.3.3 The Egor Putilov affair – A dual-track dissemination case study

Egor Putilov (using the aliases Alexander Fridback, Tobias Lagerfeldt and at least three other identities) arrived in Sweden from Russia in 2006. Putilov worked for the Swedish Migration Agency (*Migrationsverket*) from 2012 to 2015. From February 2016 he worked as assistant in the Sweden Democrats' parliamentary secretariat – a party known for anti-migration and Eurosceptic positions. He had earlier applied for posts at the Civil Contingencies Agency and

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[190] *Eat NATO for Breakfast: Abolish Frontex and Demilitarize Europe's Borders*, „Peoples Dispatch", Marcz 25, 2022, https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/03/25/eat-nato-for-breakfast-abolish-frontex-and-demilitarize-europes-borders/, [last access: 15.07.2025].
[191] *Refusing Control: Abolish Frontex*, „LSE Justice, Equity and Technology", 2022, https://www.lse.ac.uk/justice-equity-technology/Justice-Equity-and-Technology-Table/Articles/Refusing-Control-Abolish-Frontex [last access: 15.07.2025].
[192] *Belarus Fake Social Migrants*, „RFE/RL", 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-fake-social-migrants/31590612.html [last access: 15.07.2025].
[193] *Meta, Adversarial Threat Report*, December 2021, https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Metas-Adversarial-Threat-Report.pdf [last access: 15.07.2025].
[194] *Polish Soldier Reportedly Crosses Border into Belarus Claiming Asylum*, „Notes from Poland", 17.12.2021, https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/12/17/polish-soldier-reportedly-crosses-border-into-belarus-claiming-asylum/ [last access: 15.07.2025].

Swedish Public Radio[195]. Under one set of pseudonyms he published anti-migration opinion pieces in leading Swedish newspapers; under others he advanced radical pro-migration demands (e.g. voting rights for asylum-seekers and 'undocumented' migrants[196]) while presenting himself as a volunteer for Refugees Welcome. By debating with himself in the media he deepened social polarisation and manipulated the migration discourse.

The affair exemplifies the Russian doctrine of 'exploiting the protest potential' through deliberate manipulation that polarises sensitive issues. Putilov has never been formally charged, nor has cooperation with Russian intelligence been proven.

FIMI operations that use influence agents are harder to detect; analysts should assume that polarising themes attract FIMI activity on both poles, with one pole operated covertly and the other partly overtly to create additional confusion. The objective is not to promote one stance over another but to sow disorder, discredit institutions, poison public debate, manipulate decision-making and foster mistrust – i.e. polarisation.

Detecting such interference is difficult because dissemination often bypasses the overt Russian ecosystem and relies on agent-driven activity. It therefore requires member-state and EU bodies to conduct detailed analysis of narratives that sharply diverge from those promoted by overt Russian channels.

4.3.4. Synergistic effects of the dual-track narrative strategy

Russian disinformation campaigns employ a dual-track narrative strategy, simultaneously targeting opposing poles of the public debate on migration and providing them with manipulated or false messages to maximise social fragmentation. This approach produces a **triad of destabilisation**:

1) Conflict over "for vs. against" supplants substantive debate on migration's complexities, reducing discourse to adversarial binaries.

2) Erosion of trust in EU institutions arises from persistent delegitimisation of decision-makers' capacity to manage migration effectively.

3) Radicalisation and polarisation intensify, empowering extremist parties that capitalise on emotionally charged, manipulated arguments.

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[195] *Sverigedemokraternas ryska medarbetare*, "Sveriges Radio", September 22, 2016, https://sverigesradio.se/sida/gruppsida.aspx?programid=3437&grupp=23282&artikel=6522921, [last access: 15.07.2025]; *Aftonbladet: SD anställde rysk agent*, "Cornucopia", September 23, 2016, http://cornucopia.cornubot.se/2016/09/aftonbladet-sd-anstallde-rysk.html, [last access: 15.07.2025]; E. Putilov, *Debatt: Vi måste prata om migrationen*, "Aftonbladet", 2016, http://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/article23358801.ab, [last access: 15.07.2025]; *Sweden Democrat aide resigns over Russian deal*, "The Local Sweden", September 24, 2016, https://www.thelocal.se/20160924/sweden-democrat-aide-resigns-over-russian-deal [last access: 15.07.2025]; *Egor Putilov säger upp sig från Sverigedemokraterna*, "SVT Nyheter", September 23, 2016, http://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/egot-putilov-sager-upp-sig-fran-sverigedemokraterna, [last access: 15.07.2025]; *Med sådana Sverigevänner behövs inga fiender*, "Sydsvenskan", September 28, 2016, http://www.sydsvenskan.se/2016-09-28/med-sadana-sverigevanner-behovs-inga-fiender, [last access: 15.07.2025].
[196] *Ge asylsökande och papperslösa rösträtt*, „Aftonbladet", https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/5Vyqke/ge-asylsokande-och-papperslosa-rostratt [last access: 15.07.2025].

The **mutual reinforcement** of contradictory narratives hinges on two mechanisms. First, polarised messages exploit cognitive biases – primarily the "us vs. them" heuristic – amplified within social-media echo chambers. Second, rapid, platform-synchronised dissemination ensures both narratives surface concurrently, generating confusion and reinforcing each other's perceived validity.

Dual-track narratives are coordinated across mainstream press sites, social-media echo chambers and encrypted messaging apps. Algorithm-driven filter bubbles further intensify group-specific exposure, ensuring each audience sees only the version of the narrative tailored to exacerbate division.

Bot amplification, orchestrated comment section storms, and pseudo-grassroots (astroturf) accounts manufacture the illusion of mass public division. These tactics fabricate consensus and magnify emotional responses, concretising the adversarial "us vs. them" framing. Conventional disinformation/FIMI detection tools are focused on social media platforms and do not take into account situations where opposing narratives are simultaneously disseminated, e.g. exclusively through private chat rooms and in traditional media through agents of influence. Achieving full situational awareness requires deep and continuous inter-institutional cooperation that simultaneously tracks both poles and identifies temporal synchronisation patterns to expose coordinated operations.

Over the long term, these dynamics yield profound social consequences such: deepened political polarisation and diminished social capital hinder constructive dialogue and compromise; chronic information distrust erodes confidence in media and public institutions, fuelling perpetual uncertainty; and entrenched radicalisation patterns may crystallise into enduring societal divisions and undermine democratic resilience.

The strategic effect of these actions is to undermine trust in European institutions and **weaken the EU's common migration policy**. This mechanism works by strengthening extreme political groupings that use polarised narratives to build public support. As a result, the political process becomes distorted, where decisions are made based on manipulated assessments of public sentiment rather than substantive analysis of migration challenges.

4.4. Empirical analysis: The case of the Polish-Belarusian border

4.4.1. Context and course of the crisis

The instrumentalisation of migration at the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021 constitutes one of the most visible examples of hybrid operations targeting the European Union. The immediate background of the crisis lies in the growing tensions between Belarus and the EU following the fraudulent presidential election in Belarus in 2020 and the imposition of successive rounds of sanctions on the Lukashenko regime. In retaliation, Minsk orchestrated an artificial migration route by facilitating the organised travel of migrants from the Middle East and Africa to Belarus, and further toward the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

Initially, flights to Minsk were mostly operated from Baghdad, but following the suspension of direct connections in August 2021, alternative routes through Istanbul, Dubai, and Damascus became central. Migrants arriving in Belarus were accommodated in makeshift camps near the Polish border, under the supervision of Belarusian border guards and the KGB, and were systematically guided toward border crossing points. According to Center fo Eastern Studies

(OSW) data, from 1 to 26 October 2021, Polish authorities recorded over 14,000 attempted illegal crossings, a stark increase from 7,535 in September and 3,500 in August[197].

Belarusian authorities framed their actions as a response to alleged NATO military threats, criticising Poland's deployment of armed forces at the border. However, the intent was clearly coercive: to provoke humanitarian incidents, strain the EU's migration system, and pressure the Union into reversing sanctions. Concurrently, a disinformation campaign accused Poland of deliberately creating a humanitarian disaster. Belarusian and Russian media amplified narratives highlighting suffering migrants, particularly women and children, and attributed responsibility to Western interventions in the Middle East.

4.4.2. Identification of the FIMI operation

The instrumentalisation campaign unfolded in three major waves: September, November, and December 2021. Each wave followed a similar operational pattern: mass arrival of migrants in Belarus, their mobilisation toward EU borders, and disinformation aimed at discrediting the targeted states. The most striking moment occurred on 8 November 2021, when Belarusian forces directed 2,000–4,000 migrants toward the Bruzgi-Kuźnica border crossing[198]. This was preceded by a deliberate information operation highlighting a supposed 'migrant march' to the EU, escalating psychological pressure on Polish authorities.

Content shared by Belarusian channels, often echoed by Russian state media, portrayed migrants as victims of Western hypocrisy and stressed the humanitarian angle. Simultaneously, Belarusian forces actively assisted migrants with logistical support—including tools to destroy barriers and supplies for surviving harsh conditions—further proving the coordinated nature of the operation.

PISM reports confirm the direct role of Russia in sustaining the crisis, both by facilitating migrant transit through its territory and by shielding Belarus diplomatically. Operationally, Moscow and Minsk cooperated at the level of border guard leadership and intelligence coordination. While Belarus acted as the main executor, Russia provided strategic cover and benefited from the operation's destabilising effects on NATO's eastern flank[199]. These operational activities were accompanied by coordinated Russian-Belarusian disinformation campaigns targeting Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian societies, accusing EU and NATO members of violating international law and humanitarian principles, while using manipulated media content and false narratives about migrant mistreatment to polarize European public opinion and undermine support for affected border states[200].

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[197] P. Żochowski, *Belarus: An Escalation Of the Migration Crisis*, Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), October 27, 2021, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-10-27/belarus-escalation-migration-crisis [last access: 15.07.2025].

[198] A.M. Dyner, *Crisis on Belarus-Poland Border Exacerbated*, „PISM Bulletin", November 9, 2021, https://www.pism.pl/publications/crisis-on-belarus-poland-border-exacerbated, [last access: 15.07.2025].

[199] A.M. Dyner, *NATO Countries Respond to Russia's Instrumentalisation of Migration*, „PISM Bulletin", January 26, 2024, https://www.pism.pl/publications/nato-countries-respond-to-russias-instrumentalisation-of-migration, [last access: 15.07.2025].

[200] F. Bryjka, A. Legucka, *Russian and Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda in the Context of the Polish-Belarusian Border Crisis*, „PISM Bulletin", December 9, 2021, https://pism.pl/publications/russian-and-belarusian-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-the-context-of-the-polish-belarusian-border-crisis, [last access: 15.07.2025].

4.4.3. Effectiveness and impact

The operation had several immediate and long-term consequences. Firstly, it succeeded in attracting widespread media attention and polarising public opinion in Poland and across Europe. It reinforced anti-immigrant narratives and contributed to a securitised perception of migration. In Poland, public support for strict border protection rose, which legitimised the deployment of military forces and the construction of a physical border barrier.

Secondly, the EU migration policy faced a profound test. The instrumentalised use of migrants raised complex legal and moral questions, challenging the EU's commitment to international protection standards. The use of pushbacks and denial of asylum at the border drew criticism from NGOs but was tolerated politically due to national security concerns.

Thirdly, in the broader strategic context, the operation served as a stress test for NATO and the EU's eastern flank. It illustrated the effectiveness of migration as a low-cost hybrid weapon. Although it did not break EU unity or lead to concessions, it created a precedent for future operations and a playbook for instrumentalisation. The experience prompted countries like Finland and Estonia to tighten border controls and prepare for similar threats.

According to monitoring of public discourse, as compiled in disinformation tracking reports (e.g., EUvsDisinfo, Debunk.org), the migration crisis also facilitated a series of hostile narratives. These included messages portraying the EU and its member states as abusers of migrant rights (e.g., 'Push-backs, electric shocks, and dog attacks make the EU a human-rights abuser'), discrediting the hybrid warfare framing as propaganda ('the hybrid attack narrative is EU propaganda to deflect from its own abuses'), and legitimising Belarusian actions ('Belarus provides food and shelter; claims of 'weaponised migration are a Western myth'). Such narratives sought to undermine both the credibility of the EU's border policy and its normative legitimacy.

Finally, the migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border may have had an indirect preparatory role ahead of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The crisis contributed to the radicalisation of anti-migration attitudes and could have been intended to lower public empathy toward future refugee movements, particularly from Ukraine. While this did not materialise – Polish society demonstrated exceptional solidarity with Ukrainian refugees – the attempt to exploit societal divides illustrates the long-term strategy behind FIMI operations.

In sum, the events of 2021 at the Polish-Belarusian border exemplify a complex hybrid operation where migration was weaponised to achieve political and strategic aims. Belarus served as the operational platform, while Russia supported and expanded the scope of the attack, using migration to test EU resilience and deepen regional instability.

4.5. Systemic implications and counteraction

The difficult task of reconciling the need for border protection with the requirements of transparency and democratic standards is being exploited in Russian and Belarusian hybrid operations. These remain among Russia's primary tools for exerting influence over the EU. Their objectives include deepening social polarisation, pressuring national governments, and undermining allied cohesion. Russia resorts to such methods because more conventional

instruments of foreign policy have largely proven ineffective against NATO member states, while direct military action would risk open confrontation with the Alliance[201].

Among the tools available, Russia views the deliberate creation of border crises involving migrants as one of the most effective means of shaping political discourse within the EU. This tactic frames migrants as a major security threat to European states, amplifying fear and societal tension. Migration instrumentalisation is closely intertwined with other hybrid threats, including disinformation, cyberattacks, and military intimidation. By combining these tools, Russia seeks to erode the sense of security in frontline countries, forcing them to bear both the practical and reputational costs of the crisis.

The instrumentalisation of migration by Russia – particularly its role in intensifying migratory flows from Syria to Europe through military involvement and political support for Assad – played a crucial role in amplifying divisions within the EU. By creating or sustaining migration pressure on Europe's borders, Russia helped fuel anxieties that nationalist and conservative actors were quick to exploit. In Poland, the perception of migrants as culturally alien and potentially dangerous found fertile ground in a society already marked by limited exposure to diversity and a strong sense of national identity.

Right wing parties used the crisis to consolidate electoral support. This marked a good example of how the narrative connecting migration as a threat with the distrust towards the EU institutions was normalised in the public space. The party framed EU-imposed relocation schemes as an infringement on national sovereignty and a danger to Polish society, contributing to widespread resistance to refugee acceptance. Post-2015 crisis, Polish government adopted a firm anti-relocation stance, cancelled previous commitments, and pushed narratives equating EU migration policy with external coercion. While institutional actions such as parliamentary resolutions and legal disputes with the EU ensued, the core effect was narrative: portraying Brussels as disconnected from Polish realities and willing to impose cultural and security risks on member states. Additionally, it allowed for portraying the refusal of cooperation within EU mechanisms (whose purpose was solidarity with other EU Member States) as a matter of national interest and sovereignty[202].

These developments aligned closely with the objectives outlined in Russian strategic thinking on migration instrumentalisation which anticipated that migratory pressure – when paired with local fears and cultural tensions – can catalyse political polarisation, weaken trust in democratic institutions, and fracture supranational cohesion. By reinforcing the notion that European institutions endangered national identity and failed to protect citizens, these narratives advanced the very outcomes that Russia had hoped to provoke.

The radicalisation of migration discourse that accompanied the crisis from 2015 was visible especially in the social media. According to the study by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung which observed migration narratives in social platforms between 2017 and 2018 in 28 European states, migration became a major subject of discussions in social media platforms which was additionally fuelled by the personal issues (such as lack of economic stability or fear for

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[201] A.M. Dyner, *NATO Countries Respond…*op.cit.

[202] K. Vaagland, O. Chmiel, *Parochialism and Non-co-operation: The Case of Poland's Opposition to EU Migration Policy*, "Journal Common Market Studies", No. 62(5), September 2024, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13544

personal safety), relevant for the given population[203]. These were, however, used in an engineered way by the anti-migration actors who adapted their narratives to local realities and used disinformation to 'steer the conversation'[204]. The authors highlighted that none of the studies conversation included 'resonating progressive or migration supporting narratives' which highlighted how in the public discourse enmity towards migrants was normalized.

Such a radicalisation created a foundation for changing the EU approach to immigrants and refugees towards the one focused on internal security and on accommodation of the growing scepticism towards the asylum law and openness towards migrants. Thus, the EU expanded the mandate of Frontex in 2016 from being primarily supportive and advisory to conducting autonomous field operations. It became responsible for organising returns of migrants, increased its presence in the critical EU border areas while its deployment was to grow from 1 500 in 2019 to 10 000 troops in 2027[205]. All these changes marked successful securitisation of migration in the EU which additionally, started cooperation on migration control with actors who had a documented record of breaking humanitarian international law, such as Libyan coast guards and governments in Egypt or Tunisia. In the dilemma between international law and human rights on the one hand and border security on the other, it seemed the latter achieved definite victory.

Prioritising border security was an important factor influencing the way Russia and Belarus decided to continue instrumentalising migrants on the eastern borders of the EU. The 2021 migration crisis at the EU–Belarus border, orchestrated by Belarus with Russian backing, triggered an even further shift in how the EU approached border governance. Migrants pushed toward EU borders were portrayed by the European Commission as tools in a 'hybrid attack', and the language of security quickly overtook that of humanitarian obligation. Member States, particularly those on the EU's eastern flank, demanded changes to EU law that would allow them to bypass key elements of international protection standards. Pushbacks – previously considered clear violations of international law – were increasingly reframed as legitimate self-defence. Though such measures raised genuine legal and moral concerns, they were deployed in a context shaped by deliberate instrumentalisation. Russia and Belarus exploited the EU's legal and humanitarian commitments to provoke political fractures, expose legal ambiguities, and fuel distrust toward Brussels.

In this climate, the European Commission introduced the Instrumentalisation Regulation in 2021, designed to allow emergency derogations from EU asylum law when migration is deemed weaponised by a third country. The Regulation enables measures such as delayed asylum registrations, limited reception standards, restricted access to territory, and fast-tracked returns – all of which risk undermining the core principles of the Common European Asylum System and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights[206]. By formalising these exceptions, the Regulation not only legalises practices that have long been criticised – such as pushbacks – but also weakens judicial oversight and expands the legal grey zone around migrant rights. While the

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[203] *Migration Narratives in Europe Through Conversations On Public Social Media*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019, p. 5, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/15374-20190510.pdf

[204] Ibidem, p. 6-7.

[205] *"Regaining Control": New Powers for Frontex*, Statewatch, https://www.statewatch.org/deportation-union-rights-accountability-and-the-eu-s-push-to-increase-forced-removals/frontex-the-eu-s-deportation-machine/regaining-control-new-powers-for-frontex/ [last access: 15.07.2025].

[206] M. Gkliati, *Let's Call It What It Is: Hybrid Threats and Instrumentalisation as the Evolution of Securitisation in Migration Management*, European Papers, Vol. 8, 2023, No. 2, p. 561-578 https://www.europeanpapers.eu/europeanforum/lets-call-it-what-it-is-hybrid-threats-and-instrumentalisation, [last access: 15.07.2025].

Regulation is framed as a tool of resilience, it carries the danger of institutionalising a permanent state of emergency, where Member States can suspend key rights under vague definitions of 'crisis' or 'instrumentalisation'.

This trajectory directly validates what Russian military thinkers predicted as the outcome of migration instrumentalisation: the erosion of liberal democratic norms, the securitisation of public discourse, and the weakening of supranational institutions. By responding to coercive migration tactics with legal derogations and border closures, the EU risks compromising the very principles it seeks to defend – human dignity, asylum rights, and rule of law. The Instrumentalisation Regulation, while politically expedient, reflects a deeper identity crisis within the EU: the tension between upholding international law and responding to hybrid threats in a securitised political landscape.

Thus, the EU member states' actions aimed at protecting their borders during the 2021 crisis at the EU–Belarus frontier were portrayed by its threat actors as violations of international law and human rights. Particular criticism focused on 'push-back' practices, where migrants were forcibly turned back at border zones. While these measures did raise legitimate legal and humanitarian concerns under international law, they were deliberately exploited by Russia and Belarus states that had orchestrated the very conditions which led to their implementation. In doing so, Moscow and Minsk sought to discredit the EU, amplify internal divisions, and undermine the legitimacy of its migration and border policies.

According to the reports compiled by Debunk.org, the EU atrocities against migrants were one of the major narratives used by Russia and Belarus (see table above) to steer anti-EU propaganda internationally and to deepen social divisions within the EU as well as to further undermine credibility of the progressive, humanitarian and pro-EU narratives. Just as the eastern EU states partially closed the border zones for the media and strived to penalise any form of help for immigrants (including food distribution), those who wanted to pressure their governments to abide by the international law, have already been portrayed as outcasts whose actions are against national interests.

This has been used by Belarus and Russia, which – by adopting the language of humanitarian values (i.e. „Belarus provides food and shelter" narrative or „The hybrid attack narrative is EU propaganda to deflect from its own abuses") – created a false link between the activists or journalists defending irregular migrants' rights and themselves. What followed were accusations against the activists that they work as Russian/Belarussian agents or simply as 'useful idiots' whose naivety serves Russian interests. To further amplify this polarisation, there were incidents of Russian and Belarussian agents joining some NGOs supporting migrants. The case of Egor Putilov described above offers a compelling example of such actions.

This did not mean the disappearance of narratives fuelling anti-migration attitudes. They, however, have already become a part of mainstream public discourse. In Poland this contributed to refusal by paramedics to help migrants during health emergencies, or to suspension of asylum law which proved how the anti-migration actors, with the help of Russian FIMI, could effectively influence policy making in that dimension. The anti-migration side of the debate focuses on the alleged 'state weakness' in the context of migration. They highlight the effectiveness of governments' actions and present accepting the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum as giving away state sovereignty. On these grounds, this discourse is forged into practice. The bottom-up armed organisations of men appeared close to the Polish borders – first with Belarus, then with Germany, which was to be an answer to the state's 'incompetence' despite the decreasing number of migrants crossing through the eastern border and no unusual

number of those coming from Germany. Their activity, however, gained approval from some of the members of the political establishment in Poland, although their actions disrupted the border management and raised fears among the Polish society.

4.6. Conclusions

The instrumentalisation of migration as a component of hybrid operations carried out by Russia and Belarus represents a deliberate and sustained strategy aimed at undermining the EU institutional cohesion, normative identity, and democratic legitimacy. This strategy evolved in two distinct yet interconnected phases. The first, grounded in the securitisation of migration, emerged in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the subsequent increase in refugee flows into Europe. Migration was progressively framed as a civilisational and security threat, facilitating the convergence of Russian state interests with the messaging of far-right European actors.

The second phase, beginning in earnest around 2020/2021, was marked by the operationalisation of migration as a tool of coercion and information warfare. The 2021–2022 Belarusian-Polish border crisis demonstrates this development. Belarus, with Russian strategic backing, facilitated the organised transport of migrants to the EU's external borders, subsequently amplifying narratives that depicted the EU as both hypocritical and inhumane. These operations were accompanied by disinformation campaigns targeting divergent audiences through antagonistic messaging designed to polarise and exploit cognitive biases to deepen societal fragmentation.

The systematic analysis of FIMI narratives deployed during the 2021-2022 border crisis reveals a sophisticated three-tier approach targeting different cognitive and emotional responses. Identity narratives played an important role in the information space, constructing a dichotomy between an imagined collective self and an externalised 'other'. The most prominent identity-based messaging portrayed EU border states as committing atrocities against migrants. Simultaneously, Belarus positioned itself as a humanitarian victim unfairly blamed for the crisis. Problem narratives strategically linked migration to broader geopolitical tensions by framing the West as manufacturing the border crisis as a pretext for aggression. Systemic narratives provided the broader ideological framework by characterising the EU as being overwhelmed by uncontrolled migration and depicting refugees as inherently criminal or violent. These narratives served to legitimise authoritarian responses while undermining liberal democratic norms.

The case demonstrates how authoritarian actors exploit legal ambiguities and selective humanitarian rhetoric to cast themselves as legitimate defenders of international norms while simultaneously weaponising human rights discourse to delegitimise EU border policies. The overlap between disinformation networks and domestic anti-system actors reveals the hybrid nature of FIMI operations, wherein state and non-state interests converge in eroding public sphere resistance to manipulation.

The dominance of identity-based messaging underscores the strategic emphasis on emotional manipulation over rational argumentation. By propagating false claims about physical abuse and human rights violations, these campaigns successfully positioned the EU as violating its own normative frameworks while Belarus emerged as the humanitarian actor providing food and shelter.

The effect of these mechanisms has been a reconfiguration of migration policy discourse within the EU. The introduction of the Instrumentalisation Regulation and the re-framing of migration governance through the lens of hybrid threats have created expanded space for exceptional measures. While framed as necessary for resilience, such measures risk entrenching a permanent state of legal and normative exception, thereby affirming the very outcomes sought by hostile actors: a weakened, divided, and reactive EU.

4.7. Recommendations for the EU

Integrated early warning systems should take advantage of the dual dissemination patterns observed during the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, where both "pro-migrant" and "anti-migrant" campaigns reinforced each other's reach and effectiveness. Institutions within the EU and its member states that oversee monitoring of FIMI and hybrid threats must enhance their capabilities – such as through multilateral information exchange – to detect and analyse "narrative synergies." This enables a better assessment of simultaneous messaging aimed at polarised audience segments, addressing the proven tactic by which successful FIMI operations exploit societal divisions by delivering conflicting narratives to different groups.

Media literacy and educational initiatives should be designed to explicitly teach citizens how to recognise manipulations based on identity, misleading problem framing, and systemic narratives that provide ideological cover for authoritarian responses. Awareness campaigns should use real-time examples of FIMI mechanisms, documented in cases where, for instance, the Belarusian authorities presented themselves as humanitarian while orchestrating migratory flows for political leverage. These campaigns must recognise the sophistication with which adversaries target different segments of the public using tailored narratives.

Strategic communication among agencies such as Frontex, the ERCC, and EEAS must be strengthened to support rapid fact-checking and the production of pre-bunking materials in local languages. During the 2021–2022 crisis, the spread of false narratives about abuse and human rights violations demonstrated how rapidly disinformation can take hold in the absence of immediate and transparent official responses. Providing clear and timely information about actual conditions and humanitarian assistance at the border is essential to prevent adversaries from exploiting gaps in public knowledge. The limited transparency by the EU played into the hands of Belarus, who managed to present itself as more humanitarian.

Counter-messaging must be precisely tailored to the type of narrative being addressed. Campaigns targeting identity-based disinformation should pre-emptively debunk false allegations about conditions at the border, while responses to misleading problem narratives should include situational reports clarifying the real drivers of migration. Countering systemic narratives requires educational materials explaining EU policy frameworks and the geopolitical factors influencing migration.

Analysis shows that successful FIMI operations focus on maximising emotional impact through identity-based messaging and problem framing, requiring little investment in complex systemic narratives. This underlines the need for countermeasures that prioritise rapid responses to identity-driven disinformation, supported by transparent communication about the complexities of border management and humanitarian obligations. It is only through such evidence-based, targeted action that the EU can effectively counter the instrumentalisation of migration as a tool of hybrid warfare, while upholding its core values and institutional integrity.

Part V

FIMI narratives in the 2024 European elections' campaign

5.1. FIMI in electoral processes: risks, evidence and impact

In 2024 nearly half the world's population was voting in a historic wave of elections. Meanwhile the growing accessibility to and sinking costs of generative artificial intelligence heightened fears of the influence of disinformation/ FIMI campaigns significantly distorting democratic processes.

5.1.1. How and why is FIMI harmful for democracy?

Democratic processes, in particular elections and referendums, are facing an unprecedented challenge from the increasingly widespread false and misleading narratives, or conspiracy theories, massively channelled by means of AI-amplified techniques. It has been increasingly recognized, in Europe and beyond, that FIMI campaigns can pose a significant danger to electoral integrity, with foreign actors seeking to manipulate public opinion, influence voter behaviour, undermine trust in electoral processes, and de-legitimize the very foundations of the democratic governance models, while exploiting social and political cleavages that are salient locally, in order to polarise the electorate[207]. This is done specifically by means of discrediting traditional or mainstream media, promoting abstention or encouraging casting of invalid votes, launching direct, personal attacks on particular politicians, spreading allegations of fraud or unreliable vote-counting systems, as well as launching cyberattacks on voting infrastructure[208].

EU institutions have argued that "evolving geopolitical landscape, including the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, poses serious challenges to our democracies, which can lead to aggravation of societal friction, polarisation, radicalisation and decrease in trust in institutions and elections". In particular, FIMI campaigns "have become a threat to democracy and to the rule of law, particularly in the context of social media. The failure to address these risks may pose serious threats to the integrity of democratic processes and citizens' engagement by undermining public trust in democratic institutions and procedures"[209]. Moreover, according to the Council of the European Union, foreign state and non-state actors use "emerging and disruptive technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to increase the effectiveness of hybrid campaigns directed to interfere in democratic processes. AI technologies could increase the speed and scale of influence operations and enable the creation of fake content which could

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[207] *FIMI-ISAC Collective Findings I: Elections*, October 2024, p. 3-4, https://www.disinformationindex.org/research/2024-10-21-fimi-isac-collective-findings-report-on-2024-european-elections/ [last access: 30.05.2025].

[208] *2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: A Framework for Networked Defense*, European External Action Service, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2nd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en [last access: 30.05.2025].

[209] *Presidency Conclusions On Strengthening EU Democratic Resilience*, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 27 May 2025 (OR. en) 9463/25, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9463-2025-INIT/en/pdf [last access: 30.05.2025].

enhance existing threats such as the targeting of political candidates and deceiving the citizens by distorting information and reality"[210].

Indeed, over the last decade FIMI campaigns have become ever more widespread, complex and advanced, due to proliferation and outright domination of social media as the leading source of information. FIMI operations are characterised by increasing levels of automation due to technological advances. Using bot farms, or computer programs that mimic human online behaviour, attackers can spread manipulated content on a massive scale and increase the reach of malicious activity. Social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped how candidates campaign, connect with voters and discuss their positions. Very large online platforms (VLOPs) such as X (formerly Twitter), Meta (Facebook and Instagram) or TikTok enable candidates to instantly engage with millions, amplify their messages, and mobilize support[211].

Within its own jurisdiction the European Union has sought to impose content and traffic moderation on VLOPs. However, this effort has been increasingly undermined not only by VLOPs themselves, but also by the US authorities under Donald Trump's 2nd administration. The latter has emboldened VLOPs' non-compliance with the EU's Digital Service Act, which has been labelled as censorship[212]. This would mean that unregulated platforms, which accumulate data and opinion power, ever more closely intertwine political and economic influence in an unprecedented manner. As a result, systemic risks to democratic societies around the world would be massively exacerbated.

In the US context for example, existing research has shown that bot networks were deployed to promote certain candidates, while discrediting their opponents, automatically disseminating political hashtags, flooding social media with thousands of tweets that directed users to websites containing false or misleading information[213]. Some research[214] and reports[215] have linked these agents to foreign entities, mostly Russia. Meanwhile, research on the "botnet" activities on Twitter (now X) during and after the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom found that a third of the messages leading up to the referendum vote were removed (accounts disactivated), and that only about half of the most active accounts during the referendum continued to operate publicly. Overall, advanced AI-powered bots increasingly generate convincing content and manipulate online conversations in ways that are ever harder to detect[216].

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[210] *Council Conclusions On Democratic Resilience: Safeguarding Electoral Processes From Foreign Interference*, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 21 May 2024 (OR. en), 10119/24, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10119-2024-INIT/en/pdf [last access: 30.05.2025].

[211] J.A. Hendricks, D. Schill, *The Social Media Election of 2016*, in: R. Denton Jr (eds.), "The 2016 US Presidential Campaign. Political Campaigning and Communication", Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2017, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52599-0_5.

[212] J. Ohme, L.K. Seiling, C.H. De Vreese, *Will Europe Sacrifice the Digital Services Act in Negotiations with Trump?*, https://www.techpolicy.press/will-europe-sacrifice-the-digital-services-act-in-negotiations-with-trump/ [last access: 30.05.2025].

[213] E. Ferrara, O. Varol, C. Davis, F. Menczer, A. Flammini, *The rise of social bots*, "Communications of the ACM", 2016, No. 59(7), p. 96-104.

[214] M. Bastos, J. Farkas, *"Donald Trump Is My President!": The Internet Research Agency Propaganda Machine*, "Social Media + Society", 2019, No. 5(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119865466.

[215] *Russian election interference efforts focus on the Harris-Walz campaign*, "Microsoft on the Issues", September 17, 2023, https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/09/17/russian-election-interference-efforts-focus-on-the-harris-walz-campaign/ [last access: 30.05.2025].

[216] E. Ferrara, *Social BotDdetection In the Age of ChatGPT: Challenges and Opportunities*, "First Monday", 2023, No. 28(6), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i6.13185.

In contrast to domestic disinformation, foreign electoral interference also raises serious questions under international law – particularly concerning state sovereignty, democratic self-determination, and human rights obligations[217]. Sovereignty entails the right of a state to exercise exclusive control over its territory and functions. Violations of sovereignty occur when foreign interference undermines territorial integrity, governmental operations, or election infrastructure. Similarly, the principle of non-intervention prohibits coercive interference in a state's domestic affairs, including electoral processes. While actions such as cyberattacks, causing lasting harm to election infrastructure, are generally regarded as breaches of sovereignty, more subtle actions in the information space, such as FIMI campaigns, often require nuanced, case-specific assessments to determine their coercive nature. So far, and as exemplified by the EU approach, they are considered harmful, but not illegal.

5.1.2 How significant is the threat posed by Russian FIMI to European elections?

Back in 2016, the European Parliament (EP) described disinformation as putting an "increasing systematic pressure" on societies and their electoral stability[218]. Ahead of the 2019 EP elections, the then European Commissioner for Security Julian King, forewarned that elections were a tempting target for malicious actors[219]. But arguably, those fears did not materialize as expected. There was little evidence of a heavy impact of disinformation and/or FIMI campaigns on the outcome of the 2019 European elections[220].

However, the 2024 EP elections took place in a completely different geostrategic and security environment, compared to 2019. The Russian-Ukrainian war, re-launched by the full-scale Russian invasion of 24 February 2022, was the key contextual factor that shaped significantly higher threat levels for information integrity during the 2024 European elections, compared to the 2019 elections. Another major factor was the rapid technological development, enabling more advanced use of AI-powered FIMI techniques across the social media platforms.

Yet in October 2024 European Commission declared that, "based on currently available information, no major information interference operation capable of disrupting the elections was recorded. At the same time, it is widely recognized that the threat levels for information integrity during elections were high, as confirmed by the activation by the European Council of the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements for addressing foreign interference"[221]. Of course, the fact that no major disruption of the European elections was detected so far, does not mean that FIMI campaigns did not have any impact whatsoever on the

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[217] *Foreign Interference In Electoral Processes At Local and Regional Levels*, Committee on the Monitoring of the Implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and on the Respect of Human Rights and the Rule of Law at local and regional levels (Monitoring Committee), Council of Europe, 2025, https://rm.coe.int/0900001680b4cb53 [last access: 30.05.2025].

[218] *European Parliament Resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda Against It By Third Parties*, European Parliament, 2016, P8_TA(2016)0441, Brussels.

[219] L. Cerulus, *Europe's Most Hackable Election, "*Politico", 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-most-hackable-election-voter-security-catalonia-european-parliament-disinformation/ [last access: 23.03.2025].

[220] F. Marconi, *Disinformation ahead of the EU Parliamentary Elections: A Snapshot from Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy*, "European Policy Centre", 2023, https://www.epc.eu/publication/Disinformation-ahead-of-the-EU-Parliamentary-Elections-A-snapshot-fro-56f3c4/ [last access: 23.03.2025].

[221] *Memo: Known Information Interference Operations During the June 2024 Elections for the European Parliament*, European Commission, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/879707/Mem [last access: 23.03.2025].

elections' outcome, whether in terms of specific political choices, or growing generalized distrust towards mainstream political parties, or democratic institutions at the European level.

Indeed, a significant number of major Russia-linked operations have been exposed by dedicated agencies responsible for countering FIMI in the EU. For instance, the investigation conducted by EEAS found that 7 legitimate media outlets were impersonated, while 47 other inauthentic news outlets were used to promote FIMI in the context of the 2024 European elections[222]. Thousands of inauthentic accounts on X and Facebook were used to drive traffic to misleading content in almost 100 articles that mentioned European elections. In June 2024 alone, over 1200 posts were discovered on X platform that appeared to follow the sharing pattern associated with Russia-attributed FIMI operation Doppelganger. That content called for ceasing support to Ukraine, aimed at discrediting Western governments and mainstream political parties, and inciting fear around the decline of the West. Those posts generated over 4 million views.

Undoubtedly, the use of AI in foreign influence operations has increased in recent years. AI tools available today are used for cheaper, faster and higher-quality manipulative techniques. On one hand, AI does not seem to have been used to a large extent to create massive deep fakes, during the 2024 EP elections[223]. However, available evidence shows the span of tactics that can be used, and the severe risks of manipulation, if indeed used on a massive scale. It can be safely assumed that AI-amplified FIMI, as well as domestic disinformation, have been so far tested in a number of 'pilot projects' of relatively limited scope and scale, but are bound to be developed considerably over the next few years, and before the European elections of 2029.

It must be underlined that national elections in key EU member states, such as France, Germany or Poland, seem to be targeted by Russia-attributed FIMI campaigns to a far greater extent than European elections. Moreover, FIMI campaigns do not necessarily have to relate directly to a particular electoral process, or to the positions presented by individual political parties or candidates. Instead, the broader aim is to sow distrust towards democratic institutions, mainstream political parties, independent media, and civil society organizations. This in turn may empower radical anti-system political forces that tend to adopt anti-Western and pro-Russian positions.

The assessment of the scale and scope of Russia-attributed FIMI campaigns is complicated by the fact that domestic political actors may use FIMI content and tactics to – intentionally or unintentionally – further amplify and disseminate it via their digital channels. This does not necessarily mean that these domestic actors actively collaborate with Russian threat agents, but it does mean that the use of particular FIMI content is coinciding with their own political goals. Accordingly, diffusion of anti-EU messages, no matter their origin, will further political objectives of the Eurosceptic radical right or radical left political forces in Europe, and beyond. Thus research at the junction of AI-powered foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and domestic information manipulation and interference (DIMI) is something we urgently need, in order to fully understand both the threats to democratic processes and actionable responses in defence of electoral integrity worldwide.

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[222] *3rd EEAS Report on Foreign…*op.cit.

[223] S. Mukherjee, *Few AI Deep Fakes Identified in EU Elections, Microsoft President Says*, "Reuters", March 6, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/technology/few-ai-deepfakes-identified-eu-elections-microsoft-president-says-2024-06-03/ [last access: 06.06.2025].

5.1.3 How has (foreign) disinformation been influencing elections so far and why we need more research

There is still relatively limited scientific research on the actual impact of disinformation/FIMI on electoral processes. Research typically focuses on disinformation narratives, strategies, and tactics, or defensive responses to disinformation, whether in terms of regulation, fact-checking, debunking, or enhancing societal skills to identify information manipulation and interference. However, we still know very little as to how disinformation/FIMI impacts electoral choices and general participation in democratic institutions. In fact, with the current state of art, it remains difficult to reliably speak to the effects of disinformation on societal and political outcomes[224].

First, more insights are needed that speak to the nature and development of effects over time (longitudinal analysis). Secondly, more qualitative research is needed if we want to have a more nuanced account in terms of all content-driven aspects of disinformation, such as characteristics or dissemination. What is also lacking is a comprehensive understanding of people's motivations to engage with disinformation/ FIMI, as well as what their strategies to detect it are. Thus besides the 'who' and the 'how,' there is also the need to understand the 'why' – the purposes behind strategic use of disinformation, e.g. persuasion, sowing doubt, political or economic gain, etc[225].

What we already know is that online disinformation can affect trust in news media and trust in politics. For instance, a panel survey in the context of the 2017 German parliamentary election revealed that believing disinforming news had a specific impact on vote choice by alienating voters from the governing centre-right party (CDU/CSU), and driving them into the arms of right-wing populists (AfD)[226].

Research has also explored how disinformation concerns, rather than disinformation per se, can affect voter experiences of electoral integrity and trust. The degree to which citizens are concerned about disinformation can depend both on the actual instances of disinformation in an election context, and on other factors, such as the dominance of actors with a proven track record of spreading disinformation and accusing others of doing it. In case of the 2024 European elections the likelihood of disinformation being part of the media discourse was higher, as some of the parties not only engaged in disinformation practices, but also weaponized disinformation. By making claims about political opponents and legacy media spreading disinformation, they continuoulsly provoked media to report, these claims which could ultimately impact political decisions and attitudes among voters. Research results showed that voters of winning parties were less concerned about disinformation in media reporting in the election campaign, with non-populist party voters typically less concerned about disinformation than populist party voters. However, the higher the far-right party vote share was in a given country, the higher were voters' concerns about disinformation, particularly among non-populist party voters[227].

[224] D.M.J. Lazer, et al., *The Science of Fake News*, "Science »", 2018, No. 359(6380), p. 1094–1096. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998.

[225] E. Broda, J. Strömbäck, *Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News: Lessons From an Interdisciplinary, Systematic Literature Review*, "Annals of the International Communication Association", 2024, No. 48(2), p. 139–166, https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2024.2323736.

[226] F. Zimmermann, M. Kohring, *Mistrust, Disinforming News, and Vote Choice: A Panel Survey on the Origins and Consequences of Believing Disinformation in the 2017 German Parliamentary Election*, "Political Communication", 2020, No. 37(2), p. 215–237. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1686095.

[227] K. Gattermann, E. van den Hoogen, C. de Vreese, *The Role of Far-Right Party Performance in Shaping Disinformation Concerns of European Voters: Evidence from the 2024 European Parliament Elections*, "Journal of European Public Policy", 2025, p. 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2489088.

These results speak to the need for fostering responsible public debate about disinformation, not only among policy makers, but also journalists and researchers, as too alarmistic discourses can contribute to political entrepreneurs' exploitation of the issue. In this context, US-based research has shown that perceptions of disinformation's influence are shaping perceptions of democracy, and are key to the legitimacy of democratic institutions[228].

5.2. Key FIMI narratives identified in the 2024 European elections' campaign in selected EU member states

The primary targets of the European election-focused Doppelganger/RRN Media operation were France and Germany, with additional articles published in Polish and Spanish. The narratives employed varied by country, emphasizing issues such as migration, energy and climate, and the war in Ukraine to promote or discredit specific political parties and candidates[229].

In France, the focus was predominantly on the war in Ukraine, while in Germany, the war in Ukraine, as well as energy and climate issues and the war in Ukraine were equally prominent. Meanwhile, the EDMO's final report on the 2024 European elections highlighted four major narratives present across EU member states' media space[230]. The first one revolved around the EU's direct involvement in the war; the second was centred on climate denialism and climate conspiracy theories, while specifically targeting the European Green Deal and discrediting the EU as a force that aims at destroying the agricultural sector in Europe. The third one questioned election integrity, whereas the forth one depicted immigrants as an alien force seizing power in Europe.

Against this background, the objective of this section of the Report is to identify, analyse and juxtapose the dominant FIMI narratives disseminated in selected nine EU member states (France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia). The sample consists of both big and small member states, those that are typically identified as major FIMI targets, as well as those where the FIMI threat is considered less pronounced. We also accounted for geographic distribution of our case studies, looking at the east, west, north and south of the EU, while considering different degrees of geographic, as well as cultural proximity to the Russian threat actor.

It is also worth noting that Russian FIMI narratives and messages were extensively used and amplified by radical and anti-establishment domestic political forces in the EU member states. Similarly, in many member states domestic election campaigns preceded or succeeded the European election campaign, thus blurring the domestic and European agendas within broader FIMI narration. As a result, complex (dis)information ecosystems emerged, where distinguishing between organic political discourse and externally manipulated content has become increasingly challenging.

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[228] A.R.N. Ross, C. Vaccari, A. Chadwick, *Russian Meddling in U.S. Elections: How News of Disinformation's Impact Can Affect Trust in Electoral Outcomes and Satisfaction with Democracy*, "Mass Communication and Society", 2022, No. 25(6), p. 786–811, https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2022.2119871.

[229] *Doppelganger Strikes Back: FIMI Activities in the Context of the EE24*, European External Action Service, June 2024, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/uploads/2024/06/EEAS-TechnicalReport-DoppelgangerEE24_June2024.pdf. [last access: 06.04.2025].

[230] *Final Report: Outputs and Outcomes of a Community-Wide Effort*, EDMO Task Force on the 2024 European Parliament Elections, 2024, https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Report-–-EDMO-TF-EU24.pdf [last access: 12.04.2025].

5.2.1. France

As specified in the 3rd EEAS report (March 2025), the EU's diplomatic service detected and analysed 505 FIMI incidents between 4 November 2023 and 4 November 2024. Whereas the majority (257) of the incidents were targeting Ukraine, France was the 2nd main target with 152 cases that originated from the Russian and Chinese FIMI ecosystems[231].

The dominant narratives identified in France in the framework of the European and national election campaign in 2024 can be classified as problem narratives. The first one described the French government as a war monger that harms its own people. The second one framed the EU as a destructive force, especially when it comes to French agriculture.

The "French government is a war monger that harms its own people" FIMI narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

- French army is directly involved in the fight in Ukraine[232];

- 200 000 French citizens are to be enlisted to fight in Ukraine[233];

- European sanctions against Russia harm Europeans[234];

- Supporting Ukraine deprives France of the chance to become a global superpower again[235].

This narrative aims at de-legitimizing the French government, and personally the French president Emmanuel Macron, as a war monger that pursues aggressive policies that only produce negative effects for the French people. Accordingly, the French government secretly sends the French soldiers to die on Ukrainian soil. This war directly affects French citizens as they are supposedly asked to enlist to be sent to fight in Ukraine, while also suffering from the negative consequences of sanctions imposed by France and the European Union on Russia. In fact, the sanctions serve no other purpose, but to make the innocent French, and other Europeans, suffer - according to the narrative. The French government acts against the core interests of the French people and the interest of the French state. The narrative thus ascribes the role of the villain to president Macron and political forces behind him, while framing the average French citizens as a collective victim. The moral of the story stipulates that the suffering of the French citizens could only end when support for Ukraine is withdrawn. This can be done when the anti-EU and anti-NATO radical right (*Rassemblement National*) gains power.

The "European Union destroys French agriculture" FIMI narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

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[231] *3rd EEAS Report*…op.cit., p. 9.

[232] *European elections - Disinfo Bulletin*, EDMO, 2024, No. 38, https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/edmo/newsletter-archives/53623 [last access: 12.05.2025].

[233] *EU's Struggle Against Russian Disinformation Pre-EU Parliament Elections*, "Devdiscourse", 2024. https://www.devdiscourse.com/article/technology/2959201-eus-struggle-against-russian-disinformation-pre-eu-parliament-elections [last access: 12.05.2025].; *France takes down fake website inviting volunteers to 'enlist in Ukraine*, "France24", 2024, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240328-france-takes-down-fake-website-inviting-volunteers-to-enlist-in-ukraine [last access: 12.05.2025].

[234] V. Goury-Laffont, *French Far Right Calls Out 'Cabal' After New Report on Russian Interference*, "Politico", 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/french-far-right-marine-le-pen-cabal-after-new-report-on-russian-ties/ [last access: 12.05.2025].

[235] M. Julienne, *Russian Propaganda Floods Europe's Social Networks*, "CNRS News", 2024, https://news.cnrs.fr/articles/russian-propaganda-floods-europes-social-networks [last access: 12.05.2025].

- French farmers are protesting because they have been lied to by the government and backstabbed by the EU[236];

- EU institutions are banning home-grown food;

- Farmers in France will be kicked off their land to make way for solar plants imposed by EU climate policies;

- EU climate policies to cut farming-related pollution will force EU citizens to eat insects[237];

- Ukraine's accession to the European Union will ruin French farmers who will be subject to unfair competition[238].

In this narrative the main villain is the European Union that seeks to destroy French agriculture and French farmers with high taxes, and climate policy, which is supposedly based on lies. The principal victims are the French farmers, but also all the French citizens who will not be able to grow tomatoes on their balcony because of EU's absurd regulations. Yet the farmers are also portrayed as heroes who justly protest and fiercely resist the EU's imposition. The narrative proposes a solution to save the French agricultural sector, namely to leave the European Union. Importantly, the narrative is making explicit links to other problem narratives, in particular related to climate conspiracy theories, and withdrawing support to Ukraine. The latter link shows how support for Ukraine is being framed in terms of a zero sum game. Accordingly, support for Ukraine is tantamount to harming one's own people, whereas taking care of one's own people necessarily means abandoning Ukraine.

5.2.2. Germany

As specified in the 3rd EEAS report (March 2025), the EU's diplomatic service detected and analysed 505 FIMI incidents between 4 November 2023 and 4 November 2024. Whereas the majority (257) of the incidents were targeting Ukraine, Germany was the third main target (behind France) with 73 cases detected[239].

The dominant narratives identified in Germany in the framework of the European and national election campaign in 2024 can be classified as both problem and systemic narratives. The first one described the German government as a war monger that harms its own people (problem narrative). The second one stipulated Germany's unavoidable dependence on and alliance with Russia (systemic narrative).

The "German government is a war monger that harms its own people" FIMI narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

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[236] *A Fertile Ground for Disinformation*, "Euro Climate Check", 2025, https://climatefacts.efcsn.com/reports/3760d048-299e-4ee9-9b0b-bedb524584d8 [last access: 12.05.2025].

[237] I. Kottasová, *Doppelgängers and Deepfakes: How Russian Trolls are Meddling in the World's Second-Bbiggest Democratic Vote*, "CNN", 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/04/climate/russia-disinformation-eu-elections-intl/index.html [last access: 12.05.2025].

[238] C. Goujard, *Big, Bold and Unchecked: Russian Influence Operation Thrives on Facebook*, "Politico", 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-influence-hackers-social-media-facebok-operation-thriving/ [last access: 16.05.2025].

[239] *3rd EEAS Report...*, op. cit.

- Germany is secretly preparing to enter the war in Ukraine[240];

- Supporting Ukraine and sanctions on Russia only hurt ordinary Germans[241];

- Anti-Russian decisions by NATO and EU harm Germans first and foremost[242];

- The Scholz government is neglecting ordinary Germans to fund Ukraine's war[243];

- Dragging Germany in conflict with Russia has already resulted in 30 percent of Germany's population falling below the poverty line or teetering on it[244];

- Funding tanks for Ukraine prevents sick German children from receiving life-saving support ("ten lives of German children = one Leopard tank"[245]);

- German elites would rather fund war than support their own farmers[246].

- Ukrainians in Germany receive greater social benefits and earlier pensions than German citizens.

Similarly to the case of France the main villain within the war monger narrative is the German government. Ordinary German citizens, farmers, sick children, the elderly, are the victims of a government that prefers to cater to the needs of foreigners rather than their own people. The German government acts against the core interests of the German people and the interest of the German state. The moral of the story stipulates that the suffering of the German citizens could only end when support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees in Germany is withdrawn. This can be done when the anti-EU and anti-NATO radical right (*Alternative fuer Deutschland*, AfD) gains power.

The "Germany's unavoidable dependence on and alliance with Russia" FIMI narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

- Germany is in severe crisis with essential supplies being unavailable in Berlin, and freezing people cutting down trees to provide heating due to energy shortages[247];

[240] M. Meaker, *Russia Is Targeting Germany With Fake Information as Europe Votes*, "Wired", 2024, https://www.wired.com/story/european-union-elections-russia-germany-disinformation-campaigns [last access: 16.05.2025]; G. Scherndl, *Übung der Schweizer Luftwaffe hat nichts mit „Kriegsvorbereitung" Deutschlands zu tun*, „Correctiv", 2024, https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2024/06/05/uebung-der-schweizer-luftwaffe-hat-nichts-mit-kriegsvorbereitung-deutschlands-zu-tun/ [last access: 16.06.2025].

[241] *Two Years On An Analysis of Russian State and Pro-Kremlin Information Warfare in the Context of the Invasion of Ukraine*, ISD Global, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Two-Years-on_ISD.pdf [last access: 16.05.2025].

[242] M. Laine, A. Morozova, *Leaked Files*… op.cit.

[243] *Germany Uncovers Russian Disinformation Campaign on X*, "Euractiv", 2024. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/germany-uncovers-russian-disinformation-campaign-on-x/ last access: 16.05.2025].

[244] M. Baumgärtner, et al., *How the AfD Became the Long Arm of Russia and China*, "Spiegel International", 2024, https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/afd-spionageaffaere-russland-und-china-im-fokus-neue-enthuellungen-belasten-die-partei-1714480876-a-a1c05e64-b6bc-4c6b-844e-a78a32ec4f91?sara_ref=re-so-app-sh [last access: 13.05.2025].

[245] F. Marconi, *Disinformation Ahead*…op.cit.

[246] J. Diehl, et al. *Staatsanwaltschaft ermittelt gegen AfD-Bundestagsabgeordneten Bystron*, „Spiegel Politik", 2024, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/petr-bystron-bundestag-genehmigt-durchsuchungen-bei-afd-politiker-a-9aa6019a-6d41-4b80-8712-b50cb251be1c?sara_ref=re-so-app-sh [last access: 13.05.2025].

[247] *Two Years On*…op. cit.

- German economy cannot function without cheap gas from Russia;

- German industry is dying because of rising energy costs and climate policies;

- Companies are leaving Germany and the country will soon find itself facing hunger and chaos[248].

In this narrative the principal villain is again the German government that had taken the disastrous decision to break with its indispensable ally – Russia. The dependence of the German economy and the German welfare state on Russian energy resources is a systemic one, and there exists no viable alternative. There is thus no future for Germany without Russia, and the German citizens (victims) are bound to suffer from turmoil and chaos. The narrative makes an explicit link with other narratives related to German support for Ukraine and green transition as promoted by the Green party in Germany, and the EU (villains). Accordingly, the war in Ukraine is at the heart of all Germany's economic problems[249]. The moral of the story is that German people should vote for politicians who prioritize solidarity with their own citizens over solidarity with Ukraine and an EU-imposed agenda that is detrimental to German economy[250]. According to the narrative, restoring close cooperation with Russia is in the interest of ordinary Germans.

5.2.3. Spain

Spain is an important, albeit not a key target for Russian FIMI. The dominant narratives identified in Spain in the framework of the European and national election campaign in 2024 can be classified as both identity and problem narratives. Their dominant focus was on immigration: the first one described Spain (and the West more broadly) as being violated by and subordinated to alien forces of Islamization (identity narrative). The second one blamed the European Union for imposing uncontrolled immigration (problem narrative).

The "Spain is violated by and subordinated to Islamization" FIMI narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

- Muslim immigrants despise the West and its values so much that they publicly urinate on pork meat[251];

- Muslim immigrants are violent criminals who murder Spanish children[252];

[248] M. Baumgärtner, et al., *How the AfD…*op. cit.

[249] *Pro-Kremlin Campaigns Intensify in Germany Ahead of European Elections*, ISD Global, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-kremlin-campaigns-intensify-in-germany-ahead-of-european-elections/ [last access: 13.05.2025].

[250] *Smoke, Mirrors and Gas: the Kremlin Deflects Blame for the Energy Crisis*, EUvsDisinfo, 2022, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/smoke-mirrors-and-gas-the-kremlin-deflects-blame-for-the-energy-crisis/ [last access: 13.05.2025]; F. Marconi, *Disinformation…*op. cit.

[251] *FIMI-ISAC Collective Findings I: Elections*, FIMI-ISAC, October 2024, https://www.disinformationindex.org/research/2024-10-21-fimi-isac-collective-findings-report-on-2024-european-elections/ [last access: 04.05.2025].

[252] J. Ocaña, R. Godos, *Desinformación en 2024: Cómo los bulos sobre la dana destaparon las campañas orquestadas*, "EFEverifica", 2024, https://verifica.efe.com/desinformacion-2024-bulos-dana-destaparon-campanas-orquestadas/ [last access: 15.05.2025].

- Muslim immigrants receive 1000 EUR in monthly aid so that they repopulate the country and vote for left-wing parties in the future[253];

- Muslim immigrants are taking power in Spain, while electing their own mayors in some cities[254], and establishing an "Islamic Emirate of Catalonia"[255].

In this narrative the figure of the villain is embodied by Muslim immigrants who seek to defeat the West and impose their barbaric rules and values on Western societies. The victims are Spanish citizens, framed as an oppressed minority in their own country. However, perhaps even greater villains than the alien invaders themselves are those who allow them to come, namely the leftist elites that act against the interest of the Spanish (or Catalan, or European) people by actively allowing Islamization of Europe with a view to satisfy their short-term electoral gains.

The "European Union imposes uncontrolled migration" FIMI narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

- The European migration pact forced Spain to open all borders[256];

- Uncontrolled immigration results in health risks, such as an epidemic of ringworm and scabies disseminated in Spain by migrants[257];

- Immigrants enjoy preferential treatment in accessing social aid and social security; they are more privileged in Spain than anywhere else in Europe[258].

This narrative aims at de-legitimizing the European Union as a force of destruction of European states and societies. The evil European elites care more about the interests of immigrants rather than the European people. Here, Muslim immigrants take the place of the Ukrainian refugees (as in the case of FIMI narratives disseminated in France and Germany), but the objective of the narrative is similar. It is to portray national and European liberal and left-wing elites as manifestly detached from their own people so that they put interests of foreigners over the interests of their compatriots.

In case of disinformation disseminated in Spain, complex links have been made between the anti-immigration narratives and the destruction-of-the-Spanish-agricultural-sector narrative. Anti-migration narrative was also used to undermine election integrity. As to the former, FIMI micro-narratives were spread claiming that Spanish farmers were threatened by Moroccan

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[253] *Desinformación sobre la Unión Europea en un año electoral*, "EFEverifica", https://verifica.efe.com/desinformacion-sobre-la-union-europea-elecciones/ [last access: 15.05.2025].

[254] *No, el hombre negro que aparece en este vídeo entrando en el Ayuntamiento de La Frontera (El Hierro) no es el nuevo alcalde: es el deportista Younousse Diop*, "Maldita", 2024, https://maldita.es/malditobulo/20240429/video-nuevo-alcalde-negro-la-frontera/ [last access: 15.05.2025].

[255] *Carteles en Cataluña no dan la bienvenida a un Emirato Islámico, es propaganda electoral*, "EFEverifica", https://verifica.efe.com/carteles-cataluna-emirato-islamico-propaganda-electoral/ [last access: 15.05.2025].

[256] L. Deseille, *Elections européennes 2024: comment la désinformation s'est invitée dans la campagne chez nos voisins européens*, "Franceinfo", https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/elections-europeennes-2024-comment-la-desinformation-s-est-invitee-dans-la-campagne-chez-nos-voisins-europeens_6583995.html [last access: 15.05.2025].

[257] *"Islamista", "musulmán" e "ilegal": así ha dibujado la desinformación a las personas migrantes durante las elecciones europeas*, "Maldita", https://maldita.es/migracion/20240703/analisis-desinformacion-elecciones-europeas/ [last access: 07.03.2025].

[258] *No hay 100.000 inmigrantes que cobren pensiones no contributivas*, "Infoveritas", 2023, https://info-veritas.com/no-hay-100-000-inmigrantes-que-cobren-pensiones-no-contributivas/ [last access: 17.03.2025].

agriculture, as well as imported Moroccan strawberries were contaminated with norovirus[259]. How was the relationship between various narratives established? First, the anti-migrant identity narrative in Spain is essentially anti-Muslim, and mostly relates to migrants from Southern Mediterranean, including Morocco. Thus the micronarrative stipulated that the villain migrants' country of origin was victimizing Spain, while adversely affecting its economy and health of its population. The Muslim threat comes in many manifestations, and it is allowed by the European Union that lets harmful products from Muslim countries into the European and Spanish market. As to elections integrity, a message went viral on social media claiming that Muslims living in Belgium were massively voting at the Spanish consulate in Brussels for Spanish candidates in European elections[260].

5.2.4. Italy

Italy represents a particularly complex case study in the European disinformation landscape during the 2024 European Parliament elections. As the EU's third-largest economy with a history of susceptibility to information manipulation campaigns, Italy faced significant challenges from both domestic and foreign disinformation actors. The country's political environment, dominated by Giorgia Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*) coalition, created fertile ground for various manipulative narratives that sought to exploit existing social tensions and political polarisation[261]. Moreover, one must stress that Italy's information space is influenced by openly fascist parties, such as Forza Nuova.

According to EDMO, Italy was among the countries experiencing intensified disinformation campaigns during the electoral period, with false narratives targeting key domestic issues including migration, EU integration, and climate policies[262]. The Italian information ecosystem was characterised by sophisticated coordination between domestic political actors and foreign influence operations, particularly those linked to Russian disinformation networks[263].

In this context, three FIMI narratives were identified as dominant during the 2024 European elections campaign. These included one identity and two problem narratives.

The "Immigration is the primary threat to Italy's cultural identity and prosperity" identity narrative featured the following messages:

- Muslims as an existential threat to Italian/European civilisation;
- Migrants receive preferential treatment over Italian citizens;
- Migrants receive €1,000 monthly payments whilst Italian families struggle economically[264];
- Muslim communities were establishing parallel societies that refused integration;

[259] S. Hernández, *Elecciones Europeas 2024: la desinformación pone a prueba las defensas de la UE*, "EFEverifica", https://verifica.efe.com/elecciones-europeas-2024-la-desinformacion-pone-a-prueba-las-defensas-de-la-ue/ [last access:12.03.2025].

[260] *Desinformación sobre la Unión Europea...*, op.cit.

[261] A. Donà, *The rise of the Radical Right in Italy: the case of Fratelli d'Italia*, "Journal of Modern Italian Studies", 2024, No. 27(5), p. 775–794, https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216.

[262] P. Cesarini, *Propaganda and Disinformation: Lessons from 2024/25 Elections in Europe*, European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), June 10, 2025, https://edmo.eu/edmo-news/propaganda-and-disinformation-lessons-from-2024-25-elections-in-europe/ [last access: 10.06.2025].

[263] F. Marconi, *Disinformation Ahead…*op.cit.

[264] Ibidem.

- Islamic 'conquest' advances through demographic means;
- Immigration is a tool of EU-imposed demographic replacement.

The most prominent disinformation narrative during Italy's 2024 European elections centred on anti-immigration themes, building upon well-established patterns from previous electoral cycles. This was not a new narrative as false claims suggesting that the EU's migration policies were part of a deliberate strategy to replace native European populations, echoing the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory, first circulating during the EP 2019 elections.[265]

Migration remains a deeply divisive topic in Italy, with racist, xenophobic, and migration-related disinformation circulating continuously. The narrative portrayed Muslim immigrants as fundamentally incompatible with Western values and Italian culture[266]. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are often falsely depicted as villains: unfairly exploiting the welfare system, participating in criminal activities, including recent claims directed at Ukrainians fleeing war, and failing to integrate by imposing their own cultural and religious norms. Furthermore, each time the issue of revising Italy's nationality law resurfaces, it is accompanied by renewed waves of disinformation[267].

These narratives were amplified through sophisticated social media campaigns, often using artificially generated images showing veiled women alongside slogans such as "Let's change Europe before it changes us", prominently featured in Lega party materials[268]. The narrative successfully exploited genuine economic anxieties amongst Italian voters, reframing complex socio-economic issues through a xenophobic lens that positioned immigration as the primary threat to Italian prosperity and cultural identity.

The "EU acts against Italian national interests" problem narrative featured the following messages:

- EU is an oppressive bureaucratic entity undermining Italian sovereignty;
- Brussels imposes policies that harm Italian farmers and workers;
- EU climate policies are designed to destroy Italian industry;
- European institutions are corrupt and undemocratic.

This narrative gained particular traction around the European Green Deal, with claims suggesting that EU climate policies would force the closure of Italian industries and agricultural enterprises[269]. Disinformation campaigns specifically targeted farmers, claiming that Brussels bureaucrats were imposing regulations that would bankrupt Italian agriculture whilst benefiting foreign competitors[270]. In this respect the following messages were disseminated:

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[265] F. Pierri, A. Artoni, S. Ceri, *Investigating Italian Disinformation Spreading on Twitter in the Context of 2019 European Elections,* "PLOS ONE", January 17, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0227821

[266] K. Gattermann, E. van den Hoogen, C. de Vreese, *The Role of Far-Right Party Performance in Shaping Disinformation Concerns of European Voters: Evidence From the 2024 European Parliament Elections*, "Journal of European Public Policy", https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2489088.

[267] M.G. Sessa, *Disinformation Landscape in Italy*, EU DisinfoLab, March 2023, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/20230224_IT_DisinfoFS.pdf [last access: 10.06.2025].

[268] P. Zerka, *Welcome to Barbieland: European Sentiment in the Year of Wars and Elections*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 2024, https://ecfr.eu/publication/welcome-to-barbieland-european-sentiment-in-the-year-of-wars-and-elections/ [last access: 27.04.2025].

[269] O. Pollicino, P. Dunn, *Disinformazione e intelligenza artificiale nell'anno delle global elections: rischi (ed opportunità)*, "Federalismi.it", Università Commerciale "L. Bocconi", May 29, 2024.

[270] 1 *Lezioni comuni dalle elezioni del Parlamento europeo del 2024 Valutazione post-elettorale e costruzione di una base per l'advocacy futura*, Sintesi del Webinar conclusivo SEEEDS - Pacchetto di lavoro 5, European

- EU climate policies are economic warfare against Italy;
- Renewable energy transition as a threat to Italian jobs;
- Green Deal policies enforce consumption of insects and synthetic meat.

It should be noted that climate-related disinformation significantly evolved since 2019, with more sophisticated narratives linking environmental policies to economic and cultural threats[271]. These narratives proved effective during farmer protests in March 2024, when disinformation amplified legitimate grievances into conspiracy theories about deliberate economic sabotage[272]. Messaging strategically connected climate policies to broader anti-elite sentiment, presenting environmental regulations as tools used by villain and disconnected Brussels bureaucrats to control Italian citizens – their victims.

The "Do not trust the electoral process" problem narrative featured the following messages:

- Voting systems were compromised by foreign interference;
- Mainstream media manipulated election coverage;
- EU legislation provided mechanisms for countries to leave the union if electoral turnout fell below certain thresholds[273].

This narrative was highly concerning as it aimed at undermining confidence in the electoral process itself[274], while suppressing voter participation. In this respect, the Italian case reveals significant FIMI evolution between the 2019 and 2024 European elections. Whilst 2019 disinformation efforts were primarily focused on immigration and EU criticism, the 2024 campaigns demonstrated greater sophistication and thematic diversity, as well as a stronger focus on issues related to climate policies and the very existence of the European Union. The use of artificial intelligence to generate convincing visual content marked another significant advancement, with AI-generated images becoming commonplace in anti-immigration campaigns.

Most significantly, 2024 saw the emergence of systematic attacks on electoral integrity itself – a theme that was marginal in 2019 but became central to undermining democratic legitimacy[275]. The integration of these narratives across multiple platforms, from mainstream social media to encrypted messaging applications, demonstrated a more mature and coordinated approach to information manipulation.

Partnership for Democracy 2024, https://epd.eu/content/uploads/2024/10/SEEEDS_WP5-summary-report-fact-sheet-it.pdf [last access: 27.04.2025].

[271] J.L. Newell, *Italy the Day After the European Parliament Elections of 8 and 9 June*, "Contemporary Italian Politics", 2024, No. 16(3), p. 263–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2367845.

[272] L. Von der Heyde, A.C, Haensch, A. Wenz, B. Ma, *United in Diversity? Contextual Biases in LLM-Based Predictions of the 2024 European Parliament Elections*, "arXiv", April 17, 2025, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2409.09045.

[273] G. Ivaldi, E. Zankina (eds), *2024 EP Elections Under the Shadow of Rising Populism*, "European Center for Populism Studies" (ECPS). October 29, 2024. Brussels. https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0059.

[274] A. Martynov, *The 2024 European Parliament Elections: Historical Trends and Disposition of Political Forces*, Institute of History of Ukraine, NASU, 2024 https://doi.org/10.17721/2524-048X.2024.29.4.

[275] *FIMI-ISAC Collective Findings I: Elections…*op.cit.

5.2.5 Poland

Poland emerged as a significant target of FIMI operations during the 2024 European elections, representing one of the most intensively targeted countries, according to EEAS reports[276]. Sophisticated FIMI campaigns were primarily attributed to Russian actors, that were exploiting existing societal divisions around issues of national sovereignty, migration, and Poland's relationship with Ukraine[277]. The European elections in Poland took place against a backdrop of heightened geopolitical tensions following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which fundamentally altered the disinformation landscape. The campaign witnessed convergence of domestic populist messaging with foreign influence operations, creating a complex information ecosystem where distinguishing between organic political discourse and externally manipulated content became increasingly challenging[278].

In this context, three FIMI narratives were identified as dominant during the 2024 European elections campaign. All of them can be classified as problem narratives.

The "Ukrainians receive too much support" problem narrative featured the following messages:

- Ukrainian refugees receive preferential treatment over Polish citizens in healthcare social benefits and education[279];
- Polish children were being displaced from hospitals to accommodate Ukrainian patients;
- Economic burden of supporting Ukrainian refugees undermines living standards for Poles;
- Historical grievances justify reduced support for Ukraine;
- Ukrainians are ungrateful, despite Polish assistance.

This was the most prominent disinformation narrative in Poland, which represented a telling evolution away from pro-Ukrainian solidarity observed in 2022[280]. These messages strategically exploited economic tensions and historical grievances to undermine bilateral relations and, by extension, weaken European unity in supporting Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression. They were designed to transform initial Polish solidarity with Ukraine into resentment and opposition. FIMI campaigns weaponised historical memory, notably the 1943-1944 Volhynian massacre, in order to justify contemporary anti-Ukrainian positions[281]. Russia-linked accounts amplified content suggesting that supporting Ukraine constituted a betrayal of Polish historical memory and the victims of wartime atrocities.

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[276] *3rd EEAS Report…*op.cit.

[277] S. Nazari, P. Kryvenko, M. Voltsichina, *Illegal Doppelganger Operation…*op.cit., S. Nazari, J. Kubs, J. Solak, A. Wójtowicz, *The Masquerade Continues: Doppelgänger Interferes with Polish Elections*, Alliance4Europe, 2025, https://alliance4europe.eu/doppelganger-polish-presidential-p2 [last access: 30.05.2025].

[278] *Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats and Answers in Poland*, INFO OPS Poland Foundation, September 2024, https://infoops.pl/foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats-and-answers-in-poland/ [last access: 01.06.2025].

[279] *Raport z okresu wyborów do Parlamentu Europejskiego 2024*, Dział Przeciwdziałania Dezinformacji, Naukowa i Akademicka Sieć Komputerowa, August 1, 2024, https://www.bezpiecznewybory.pl/baza-wiedzy/raport-z-okresu-wyborow-do-parlamentu-europejskiego-2024 [last acess: 01.06.2025]

[280] A. Legucka, *Russia's Ramps up Disinfo Campaigns Ahead of European Parliament Elections*, "PISM Bulletin" No. 82 (2390), June 5, 2024, https://pism.pl/publications/russias-ramps-up-disinfo-campaigns-ahead-of-european-parliament-elections [last access: 05.06.2025].

[281] *Monitoring of Hateful Content During the 2024 European Elections*, Jewish Association Czulent, Kraków 2024, https://czulent.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Raport-Monitoring-tresci-wybory-2024-EN-5.pdf [last access: 01.06.2025].

The "EU is fundamentally opposed to Polish sovereignty and national interest" problem narrative featured the following messages:

- Brussels imposes economic detrimental to Polish agriculture and industry;
- EU migration policies force Poland to accept 'dangerous' migrants against national interests;
- European integration is a threat to Polish Catholic values and traditional family;
- EU institutions manipulate electoral processes to prevent 'patriotic' political forces from taking power.

The anti-EU narrative gained particular resonance around the Common Agricultural Policy and migration quotas, exploiting genuine concerns about policy implementation whilst amplifying them through conspiratorial framing[282]. Disinformation on EU agricultural policies notably featured claims that EU environmental regulations would destroy Polish farming and force rural communities into poverty. Farmers' protests were a vital element of the European election campaign in Poland. Furthermore, EU migration policies were framed as an existential threat to Polish security and cultural identity. False claims suggested that EU institutions were planning to force Poland to accept unlimited numbers of Middle Eastern and African migrants, often accompanied by fabricated statistics about crime rates and cultural incompatibility[283]. The narrative strategically linked migration to broader themes of national sovereignty, presenting EU membership as a constraint on Poland's ability to control its borders and demographic composition.

The "European Green Deal will destroy Polish economy and industry" problem narrative featured the following messages:

- EU climate policies are designed to destroy Polish coal industry and energy independence;
- EU enforces consumption of insects and synthetic meat;
- Environmental regulations constitute economic warfare against Poland;
- Green transition is a globalist conspiracy designed to control national economies.

Climate-related disinformation campaigns have significantly developed and become more sophisticated in 2024, compared to 2019 European elections[284]. They strategically exploited legitimate concerns about economic transition costs whilst embedding them within broader conspiratorial frameworks about globalist control and national subjugation[285]. The messaging strategically connected environmental policies to broader anti-elite sentiment, presenting climate regulations as tools used by disconnected Brussels bureaucrats to control Polish citizens and undermine national economic independence. Another key difference was the central role of anti-Ukrainian narratives, which were virtually absent during the 2019 electoral campaign[286]. In 2024 enhanced coordination between foreign influence operations and domestic political

[282] *Dashed Hopes and the Success of the Populist Right: The Case of the 2024 European Elections in Poland*, European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2024, October 29, https://www.populismstudies.org/dashed-hopes-and-the-success-of-the-populist-right-the-case-of-the-2024-european-elections-in-poland/ [last access: 29.10.2024].

[283] *EU Elections – Disinfo Bulletin…*op.cit.

[284] *Raport z okresu wyborów...*op. cit.

[285] M. Zadroga, *The Disinformation Landscape in Poland*, EU DisinfoLab, December 4, 2023, https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/disinformation-landscape-in-poland/ [last access: 30.05.2025].

[286] *Fake newsy i dezinformacja w kampaniach wyborczych w Polsce w 2019 roku: Raport z obserwacji*, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, 2020, https://hfhr.pl/upload/2021/12/fake-newsy-i-dezinformacja_final-1.pdf [last access: 30.05.2025].

messaging was evident, with Russia-linked networks successfully adapting to exploit the changed geopolitical context following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Disinformation related to support for Ukraine, agriculture or climate policies proved particularly effective in rural and conservative constituencies.

5.2.6. Sweden

Sweden represents a unique case in the Nordic context, where FIMI operations have traditionally been less pronounced compared to other EU member states. Sweden was thus long considered a 'low-risk' target[287]. However, the 2024 European Parliament elections coincided with significant domestic political developments, including the rise of the Sweden Democrats and increased polarization around immigration and EU membership[288]. These developments show how quickly an information space can be weaponised once geopolitical pressure, domestic polarisation and technological tools align. Narratives that arose were then amplified by a loose ecosystem of Russian state outlets ('Pravda network'), Sweden-based partisan media, coordinated inauthentic behaviour linked to the Sweden Democrats' "troll factory", and click-bait outlets monetising outrage[289].

In this context, three FIMI narratives were identified as dominant during the 2024 European elections campaign. These included two identity narratives and one problem narrative.

The "Sweden's liberal elite betrays Swedish values" identity narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

- Swedish politicians prioritize EU interests over Swedish national interests;
- Sweden's open immigration policy has led to the 'Islamization' of the Swedish society;
- Swedish media and political elites silence dissenting voices about immigration;
- The Swedish establishment promotes 'woke' ideology that destroys traditional Swedish culture.

This narrative aims at delegitimizing Sweden's political establishment by portraying them as villains, fundamentally opposed to authentic Swedish interests and values. The narrative positions traditional Swedish citizens as victims of an out-of-touch elite that has abandoned its own people in favour of foreign interests and ideological projects. The Sweden Democrats and other anti-establishment forces are presented as heroes – the only authentic representatives of Swedish interests.

The "Sweden is under attack from foreign cultures"[290] identity narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

- Muslim immigrants refuse to integrate and create parallel societies in Sweden;
- Immigration has led to increased crime and social problems in Swedish cities;

[287] J. Giandomenico, H. Linderstål, *Disinformation Landscape in Sweden*, EU DisinfoLab, May 2023, https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/disinformation-landscape-in-sweden/ [last access: 30.05.2025].

[288] *Increased Spread of Disinformation Directed Towards Sweden*, Government Offices of Sweden, Ministry of Defence, July 26, 2023,

[289] C.D. Ruiz, *Market-Oriented Disinformation Research: Digital Advertising, Disinformation and Fake News on Social Media*. Routledge 2025; C. Szumksi, *Sweden's EU Campaign Overshadowed by Far-Right Troll Farm Scandal*, "Euractiv", May 30, 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/swedens-eu-campaign-overshadowed-by-far-right-troll-farm-scandal/ [last access: 30.05.2025].

[290] J. Björling, R. Szoppe, *Mitt Europa bygger murar: En multimodal kritisk diskursanalys av Sverigedemokraternas användning av memes under EU-valkampanjen 2024*, Umeå universitet 2025.

- Swedish women are unsafe due to immigrant crime;
- Swedish culture and traditions are being erased by multiculturalism;
- The Swedish welfare system is being exploited by immigrants while native Swedes suffer.

This narrative exploits existing social tensions around immigration and integration, presenting Sweden as being under existential threat from incompatible foreign cultures, notably Muslims. Native Swedes are portrayed as victims of their own government's immigration policies, while immigrants are depicted as a villain force that threatens Swedish society's fabric.

The "EU destroys Swedish sovereignty and prosperity"[291] problem narrative featured the following micro-narratives:

- EU climate policies will destroy Swedish industry and force Swedes into poverty;
- Brussels bureaucrats make decisions that harm Swedish farmers and workers;
- EU migration policies force Sweden to accept unlimited numbers of immigrants;
- EU regulations prevent Sweden from controlling its own borders and resources.

This narrative portrays the European Union as an oppressive force that systematically undermines Swedish prosperity and self-determination. Swedish citizens are depicted as victims of EU overreach, while national sovereignty is presented as the solution to all Sweden's problems. The narrative explicitly links EU membership to Sweden's domestic challenges, particularly around immigration and economic concerns.

The FIMI narratives disseminated in Sweden during the 2024 European elections campaign were strategically adapted to exploit existing domestic political tensions while undermining confidence in both Swedish institutions and EU membership. Unlike in some other member states, where external actors played a more direct role, Swedish FIMI narratives were primarily amplified through domestic political actors, particularly the Sweden Democrats, who used social media platforms and anonymous accounts to spread these messages.

The narratives consistently portrayed Sweden's liberal democratic institutions and EU membership as fundamentally opposed to Swedish interests, while positioning anti-establishment forces as the only authentic defenders of Swedish values. This approach aligns with the broader pattern of FIMI operations across EU member states, where the goal is to undermine trust in democratic institutions and European integration.

The Swedish case demonstrates how FIMI narratives can be effectively localized to exploit specific national concerns – in this case, immigration, cultural identity, and sovereignty – while maintaining the broader strategic objective of weakening EU cohesion and democratic governance. The use of humour, memes, and satirical content on social media platforms like TikTok proved particularly effective in reaching younger audiences and normalizing anti-EU and anti-immigration messaging.

5.2.7. Bulgaria

Bulgaria is particularly vulnerable to influence operations, with analysts identifying it as one of the top countries disproportionately targeted by Russian disinformation[292]. Russian targeting

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[291] Ibidem.

[292] J. Udo-Udo, G.A. Angelov, *Strategic Threat Assessment of the Pravda Disinformation Operations: Bulgaria*, Center for Information, Democracy, and Citizenship (CIDC) May 2025, Strategic Information Threats Report

methodology is guided by the ratio of a country's strategic importance to its vulnerability, which is highly unfavourable for Bulgaria. Bulgaria is a NATO's eastern flank country and EU border country, characterized by institutional weaknesses and cultural ties to Russia, which makes it easier for Russian FIMI narratives to penetrate Bulgarian information space[293]. Bulgaria's media landscape is being distorted by the so-called 'mushroom websites' – sites created on a massive scale and without overt ownership details, that spread disinformation narratives[294].

Politically, disinformation narratives that resonate the most are: the identity narrative, that underlines Bulgaria's Slavic brotherhood with Russia, with the European Union posing threat to Bulgarian traditional values; and the systemic narrative of sovereignism, where EU and NATO membership are framed as being against core Bulgarian interests. Other problem narratives speak directly to these dominant identity and systemic narratives.

The Russian identity narrative in Bulgaria relies on the historical and cultural links between the two countries. It reveals greatest consistency over time and contains a fixed set of discursive tropes. The narrative focuses on promoting shared conservative values and orthodox Slavic brotherhood with Russia. The EU and the West are framed as villains – a direct threat to Bulgarian traditional values, especially in view of the "LGBTQ propaganda"[295]. In general, the narrative stipulates that Eastern European identity is under attack.

The systemic sovereignist narrative builds on opposition towards EU-level supranational cooperation and transfer of national sovereignty to the EU, as well as on opposition towards NATO membership. The examples of messages integrated within this narrative are the following:

- EU institutions pressure member states to adopt anti-Russian stances;
- Economic interests of the Western countries benefit at the expense of Bulgarian citizens;
- BRICS is a richer 'club' than Western countries, so Bulgaria should become a member of BRICS;
- Euro adoption is a threat to Bulgaria's economic sovereignty and national stability (to the point that Bulgaria should leave the EU and join the BRICS, instead of joining the Eurozone[296]);

(SITREP), p. 4–7, 30–32, https://disinfobs.com/index.php/2025/06/18/pravda-disinformation-network-strategic-threat-assessment/ [last access: 06.07.2025]; J. Udo-Udo, G.A. Angelov, *The Pravda Ecosystem: An Analysis of the Kremlin's Regional Disinformation Strategy*, Center for Information, Democracy, and Citizenship (CIDC) April 2025, Strategic Information Threats Report (SITREP), https://disinfobs.com/index.php/access-pravda-ecosystem-dashboard-report/ [last access: 05.05.2025].

[293] B. Velcheva, R. Stefanov, M. Vladimirov, *GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021 Bulgaria*, GLOBSEC November 2021, p. 26–31, 40–43, https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2021_11/Globsec_VI_Bulgaria-Report.online.pdf [last access: 06.07.2025].

[294] G. Gotev, *The Brief – A Battle Against Disinformation Was Won*, „Euractiv", 13.06.2024, "Euractiv", https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/the-brief-a-battle-against-disinformation-was-won/ [last access: 19.06.2025].

[295] C. Nehring, *Russian Disinformation and the 2024 European Elections: Understanding Strategies, Actors and Messages*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung May 2024, https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/Essay_Russian+Disinformation+and+the+2024+European+Elections_final.pdf [last access: 06.07.2025].

[296] K. Nikolov, *Bulgarian pro-Russian party wants country to leave EU, join BRICS.*, „Euractiv", 5.08.2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarian-pro-russian-party-wants-country-to-leave-eu-join-brics/ [last access: 21.06.2025].

- NATO's Steadfast Defender 24 programme is a prelude for NATO's invasion on Russia[297];
- NATO membership for Ukraine necessarily leads to Bulgaria's active involvement in the war;
- Bulgaria's membership in NATO is a sign of weakness of the part of the Bulgarian political elite because "NATO countries are puppets controlled by the US"[298].

These dominant identity and systemic narratives, where EU and NATO are portrayed as villains and Bulgaria as a victim, are complemented by problem narratives aimed at discrediting EU support for Ukraine and questioning EU capacity to successfully conduct green transition.

As to the former, Russian FIMI messages framed EU support for Ukraine in terms of a destabilizing financial burden and geopolitical liability. Other messages aimed at fostering resentment towards Ukrainian refugees or holding the EU responsible for the war in Ukraine, for instance:

- Ukrainians drive expensive cars and are exempt from paying for fuel;
- Refugees are undeserving or unfairly exploiting Bulgaria's support;
- EU's military aid for Ukraine is prolonging the war[299].

As to the latter, it must be stressed that the European Green Deal and the associated establishment of renewable energy sources in EU countries were a major FIMI target. In Bulgaria disinformation/FIMI about green energy was spread through connected 'mushroom websites' and social media channels (Facebook, Telegram and You Tube). Originally a campaign targeting a specific wind farm project in the municipality of Vetrino, it then evolved into a widespread disinformation campaign about renewable energy sources, a fight to preserve coal-fired power plants and against military aid to Ukraine[300].

5.2.8 Romania

The 2004 European elections revealed support for anti-establishment parties: Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and S.O.S. Romania. The rhetoric of both parties has a populist, nationalist and Eurosceptic character, where S.O.S is considered more radical than AUR[301]. Their programme does not support the provision of military support to Ukraine and implicitly

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[297] T. Wesolowsky, *Mushroom Websites' Spread A Deluge Of Disinformation In Bulgaria*, „Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty", 6.04.2025, https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-mushroom-websites/32893788.html [last access: 19.06.2025].

[298] F. Marconi, *Disinformation…*op.cit., p. 8,9.

[299] Ch. Nehring, *Russian Disinformation…*op.cit.; F. Marconi, *Disinformation…*op.cit., p. 7.

[300] M. Dimitrova, *Умира ли животът заради поставянето на вятърни турбини и кой стои зад тези твърдения?*, Bulgarian National Television February 17, 2025, https://bntnews.bg/proverka-na-fakti-umira-li-zhivotat-sled-vyatarnite-turbini-i-koi-stoi-zad-tezi-tvardeniya-1266647newscheck.html [last access: 19.06.2025]; M. Kirkova, *Network of Social media Groups Spreading Disinformation About Green Energy, War in Ukraine*, Factcheck.bg, May 22, 2024, https://factcheck.bg/en/network-of-social-media-groups-spreading-disinformation-about-green-energy-war-in-ukraine/ [last access: 19.06.2025].

[301] C. Veress, *Romania Political Briefing: The 2024 European Parliament Elections in Romania*, Weekly Briefing, July 2024, p. 3-6, https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2024p07_Romania.pdf [last access: 24.06.2025].

promotes the need to cooperate with Russia[302]. The political usefulness of overtly pro-Russian narratives remains limited, and only the most radical political actors use them[303]. Yet in case of Romania, it is fairly difficult to distinguish between foreign and domestic disinformation[304]. Many of the anti-Western narratives inspired by Russia have become internalised, as an organic part of the Romanian political discourse.

The main driver of disinformation was the growing 'sovereigntist movement' combining nationalism with populism, which promoted anti-Western narratives for at least 5-7 years before the 2024 European elections. Unlike in the case of Bulgaria, where strong cultural and historical ties are the warp for Russia's FIMI, in Romania Russia's main objective is to discredit Western institutions in the eyes of the domestic audiences[305].

The systemic sovereignist narrative targets both NATO and the EU. The narrative seeks to undermine trust in the United States as an ally and in collective security within NATO. The Romania's NATO membership is likened to a loss of sovereignty, which is coupled with messages of unfounded hopes of protection in the event of any threat from Russia[306]. Meanwhile anti-EU narratives, aimed at decreasing trust in European institutions, are leveraged by external actors and further exploited by domestic ones. Accordingly, the European Union is framed as dysfunctional and weak, but at the same time as highly oppressive in its allegedly radical policies.

Sovereignist narratives align with conspiracy theories, where the nation as under threat from both internal and external enemies[307]. Due to low levels of generalized trust in institutions, Romanian society shows relatively high receptivity to conspiracy theories[308].

As part of systemic narratives, conspiracy tropes take the form of messages about European climate/digital dictatorship, "world government and a new world order", that seek to impose maximum control and surveillance over citizens, as well as to enslave the Romanian people. As part of problem narratives, the messages aim at convincing the audience that the EU allegedly plans to force Romanians to eat artificial meat, insects, and is imposing "gender ideology"[309].

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[302] K. Całus, *A Shift Further to the Right. Radical Parties are Gaining Popularity in Romania*, "OSW Commentary", April 29, 2024, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-04-29/a-shift-further-to-right-radical-parties-are-gaining [last access: 24.06.2025].

[303] C.E. Ghiţă, *Open Support for Moscow Remains Marginal, Even Amongst Populists and Eurosceptics: The Case of Romania*, in: P. Oleksy (eds.), "The European Union's narrative resilience in the Black Sea region: defining pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives in Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova", Instytut Europy Środkowej, Lublin 2024, IEŚ Policy Papers No. 4/2024, p. 55, 57–58, 62, 64, 66–68.

[304] B. Deleanu, *The Four Stages of Anti-EU (Russian) Disinformation in Romania*, „Contributors.ro", 13.04.2025, https://www.contributors.ro/the-four-stages-of-anti-eu-russian-disinformation-in-romania/ [last access: 26.06.2025].

[305] C. Cucu, *Disinformation Landscape in Romania*, EU DisinfoLab September 2023, p. 3, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919_RO_DisinfoFS.pdf, [last access: 24.06.2025].

[306] M. Prysiazhniuk, *Romania's election year amid a far-right momentum*, „International Politics and Society", 6.02.2024, https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/romanias-election-year-amid-a-far-right-momentum-7294 [last access: 26.06.2025].

[307] O. Colacel, *Conspiracy and Populist Narratives in Romanian-Language Contexts: Romania and the Republic of Moldova*, „Codrul Cosminului", 2024, t.30, no 1, pp. 85–87.

[308] C.A. Stoica, R. Umbreş, *Suspicious minds in times of crisis: determinants of Romanians' beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories*, „European Societies", 2021, t.23, n. S1, p. 257.

[309] B. Toma, M. Suciu, *Romania and the 2024 Elections: EU Related Disinformation - Targets and Challenges*, Romanian Center for European Policies, Bucharest September 2024, https://www.crpe.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/CRPE-Disinformation-2024-Report-ENG.pdf [last access: 26.06.2025].

Yet the narrative of EU oppression coexists with the narrative of EU weakness and dysfunctional character. Thus anti-European micro-narratives amplified by Russia aim at mocking, disavowing and undermining faith in the capabilities of the European Union. Examples of such messages include:

- EU cannot be treated seriously in terms of artificial intelligence or defence;
- European projects and regulations are pointless and meaningless[310].

Although, there were attempts to trigger real life events exploiting the narrative discrediting the European Green Deal, the narratives surrounding the issue of the EU's green transition gained much less amplification, than in other member states[311]. In contrast to Bulgaria, the topic of the Green Deal was of secondary importance in Romania[312].

5.2.9. Slovakia

On 15 May 2024, the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, was shot and wounded by a politically motivated individual. Whereas both the President Zuzana Čaputová and President-elect Peter Pellegrini, who were political opponents, immediately called upon all political parties to stop campaigning ahead of the European elections, this call for restraint was snubbed, and the blame ping-pong dominated the rest of the campaign[313]. This unprecedented act of political violence testifies to the brutalisation and strong polarisation in Slovak politics[314].

Similarly to the case of Romania, it is fairly difficult to separate Russian FIMI from domestic disinformation, as the former have become deeply internalised. The dominant narrative that was identified in Spring 2024 was a systemic sovereignist narrative that framed Slovakia as a pioneer of peace in Europe. During the presidential election campaign in March/April 2024, that preceded the European election campaign, a pro-European candidate Ivan Korčok was being discredited with the message that his presidency would directly engage Slovakia in the war in Ukraine[315]. Politicians from Prime Minister Fico's SMER-SSD camp disseminated messages related to 'progressive fascism' allegedly originating from the West and manifesting itself in the form of Russophobia, while accusing Brussels of warmongering.

Referring to Emmanuel Macron's statement regarding the possible deployment of troops to Ukraine in the event of a frontline collapse, Slovak politicians accused the West of escalating the conflict and Europe rushing into nuclear war. Accordingly, electing Slovak 'patriots' meant

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[310] B. Deleanu, *The Four Stages…*op. cit.

[311] Pro-Kremlin channel Rybar disseminated fake maps of farmer's protests allegedly heading from Poland, Romania, Germany, France and Spain towards Brussels to gather in front of the European Parliament on June 9, see: *Memo: Known Information Interference Operations…*op.cit.

[312] D. Sultănescu, *Climate Change: The Impact of the Online Conversation on Climate Change 2024*, Bulgarian Romanian Observatory of Digital Media March 4, 2025, Digital Narratives, Public Discourse and the Risk of Disinformation: A Data-Driven Analysis of Sensitive Topics in 2024, https://civicparticipation.ro/wp-content/uploads/CLIMATE-CHANGE-online-conversation-2024.pdf, [last access: 27.06.2025].

[313] P. Alderman, *Controlling the Narrative: the Shooting of Slovakia's Robert Fico*, 24.05.2024, https://ukandeu.ac.uk/controlling-the-narrative-the-shooting-of-slovakias-robert-fico/ [last access: 07.07.2025].

[314] K. Dębiec, *The Attempted Assassination of Slovakia's Prime Minister*, Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), May 16, 2024, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-05-16/attempted-assassination-slovakias-prime-minister [last access: 30.06.2025].

[315] *CEDMO Fact-Checking Summary: Q2 2024*, Central European Digital Media Observatory July 29, 2024, CEDMO Fact-checking Briefs, https://cedmohub.eu/wp-content/plugins/wonderplugin-pdf-embed/pdfjslight/web/viewer.html?v=2&externallinktarget=2&file=https://cedmohub.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CEDMO-Brief-24Q2-EN-Final.pdf [last access:30.06.2025].

choosing the path to peace and reshaping the EU in line with Slovak interests, whereas electing 'progressives' meant choosing the path to war and the oppression of Slovak people[316]. An attempt was even made to link the attack on Fico to Slovakia's opposition to military involvement in Ukraine, thus creating a conspiracy theory, that the attack was orchestrated by special forces of the "states supporting war (Ukraine)"[317].

Another key narrative identified was an identity narrative that juxtaposed the threat to traditional national values (poswd by the EU) and the traditional Slavic friendship (with Russia). While most Slovak parties don't officially advocate for 'Slovexit', they call for reforming the EU from within, suggesting a looser 'union of European nations' with greater national sovereignty. The EU has been long portrayed as a distant entity that acts against Slovak interests, and one that unlawfully and unjustly interferes in its member states' internal affairs. According to CEDMO survey, more Slovaks feared interference in the European elections from Brussels than from Russia or China[318]. Moreover, 35% of Slovaks considered that countering disinformation is merely a smokescreen for Western governments to restrict freedom of speech[319].

On the other hand, the identity narrative heavily relied on pan-Slavism. Slovak politicians were regularly referring to Russia as a 'traditionally friendly Slavic nation'. The narrative used pan-Slavism for relativization of Russian war crimes, as Russia's actions were framed as a necessary response to Russophobia and pressure from the West[320]. It is noteworthy that Slovak pan-Slavism emphasises common identity with Russia, while completely ignoring Ukraine as a Slavic state/ nation, or not distinguishing Ukraine from Russia. Examples of pan-Slavic messages feature:

- The EU is threatening Slovak traditional values with its 'rainbow resolutions';
- Western democracies deliberately prolong the mutual killing of Slavs in Ukraine[321].

Finally, some problem narratives were detected during the European elections' campaign. These notably concerned European policies related to migration, green transition and support for Ukraine, and included the following messages:

- The EU will force Slovaks to host migrants in their homes;
- Brussels is going to force us to eat insects;
- EU will completely ban internal combustion engines[322];

[316] M. Dubóczi, P. Dubóczi, *Slovakia Is to Be Saved from the Dictate of Brussels By 'Patriots'. Apart from the EU Elections, Disinformers Also Centred on Glorifying Russia and Fear-Mongering about a Nuclear Conflict.*, Infosecurity.sk, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom May 17, 2024, Infosecurity.sk: Bi-weekly report on emerging disinformation trends, https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/slovakia-be-saved-dictate-brussels-patriots-apart-eu-elections [last access: 07.07.2025].

[317] M. Koreň, N. Silenská, *Disinformation in Full Swing in Slovakia Ahead of EU Elections*, „Euractiv", 6.06.2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/disinformation-in-full-swing-in-slovakia-ahead-of-eu-elections/ [last access: 09.07.2025].

[318] *CEDMO Special Brief European Parliament Elections I*, Central European Digital Media Observatory May 7, 2024, CEDMO Fact-checking Briefs, https://cedmohub.eu/wp-content/plugins/wonderplugin-pdf-embed/pdfjslight/web/viewer.html?v=2&externallinktarget=2&file=https://cedmohub.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/EN-CEDMO-Trends---volby-do-EP.pdf [last access: 30.06.2025].

[319] Ibidem.

[320] M. Dubóczi, P. Dubóczi, *Slovakia is to be saved…*op.cit.

[321] M. Dubóczi, P. Dubóczi, *Slovakia's EU election campaign*...op. cit.

[322] Ibidem.

- EU is forcing citizens to consume toxic grain from Ukraine and is punishing member states for protecting its citizens from contaminated Ukrainian food[323].

5.3. FIMI in European election campaigns in 2019 and 2024: similarities and differences

The objective of this section is to provide an overview of the analysis of the dominant narratives identified in the 2024 European election campaign, as well as to shed some light on the evolution of FIMI narratives compared to the 2019 election campaign. In order to do so, the subsequent sub-sections aim at summarizing conclusions from our qualitative analysis of the nine country cases, as well as outlining tentative results of the quantitative analysis, with the particular focus on the election farud narrative.

5.3.1 Qualitative analysis: discussion of results

The FIMI narratives disiseminated across the EU member states during the 2024 European election campaign were both similar in content and strategically adapted to the national context. Whether systemic, identity or problem narratives, they were all seeking to highlight a villain and self-destructionist nature of the European Union in particular, and the West in general. Accordingly, the EU aims at destruction of European economies, societies, cultures, and is undermining peace in Europe. The FIMI narratives relied heavily on the populist radical right cleavage between the treacherous liberal elites that act against the core interests of their people, while at the same time acting in the interest of aliens – whether Ukrainians or Muslims. The narratives also outlined the way out of the decay and chaos – paved by the allegedly patriotic elites that advocated for peace, traditional values and restoration of alliance with Russia – in line with the intersts and strategic narrative of the Russian Federation.

Table 6. Dominant FIMI narratives in selected EU member states in the 2024 European election campaign

EU member state	Type of narrative	Content of the narrative
Bulgaria	Identity	Bulgaria shares the orthodox Slavic brotherhood with Russia and the EU is a threat to the Bulgarian traditional values
	Systemic	EU and NATO membership are against Bulgarian interests.
France	Problem	The French government is a war monger that harms its own people.
	Problem	The European Union destroys French agriculture.
Germany	Problem	The German government is a war monger that harms its own people.
	Systemic	Germany's unavoidable dependence on and alliance with Russia.

[323] N. Nemečkayová, A. Yeliseyeu, M. Ružičková, *Behind the Ballot: Unmasking Influence in Czechia, Slovakia and Poland's EP Races*, Policy Brief, Amo.cz December 2023, https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/AMO_Behind-the-Ballot-Unmasking-Influence-Narratives-in-Czechia-Slovakia-and-Polands-EP-Races.pdf. [last access: 30.06.2025].

Italy	Identity	Immigration is the primary threat to Italy's cultural identity and prosperity.
	Problem	The EU acts against Italian national interests.
	Problem	Do not trust the electoral process.
Poland	Problem	Ukrainians receive too much support.
	Problem	The EU is fundamentally opposed to Polish sovereignty and national interest.
	Problem	The European Green Deal will destroy the Polish economy and industry.
Romania	Systemic	Romania's EU/NATO membership means loss of sovereignty.
	Problem	The EU is oppressive for Romania and seeks maximum control over its citizens.
Slovakia	Systemic	Slovakia is a pioneer of peace in Europe and the EU's 'progressive fascism' is a path to war.
	Identity	Russia is a 'traditionally friendly Slavic nation', while the EU is threatening Slovak traditional values with its 'rainbow resolutions'.
Spain	Identity	Spain is violated by and subordinated to Islamization.
	Problem	The European Union imposes uncontrolled migration.
Sweden	Identity	Sweden's liberal elite betrays Swedish values.
	Identity	Sweden is under attack from foreign cultures.
	Problem	EU destroys Swedish sovereignty and prosperity

Source: *own study*

Among the narratives identified within our sample, problem narratives dominated, whereas identity and systemic narratives were less prevalent. Whereas systemic narratives were identified predominantly in Central and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, but also Germany), identity narratives were identified across the European Union (Bulgaria, Italy, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden). Problem narratives were of high relevance in all member states analysed.

Systemic FIMI narratives de-legitimized European security and economic orders, shaped by NATO and the European Union respectively, while highlighting alternatives, including close alliance with Russia, or membership in revisionist international groupings, such as BRICS. These narratives promoted sovereignism as an alternative to globalism and supranationalism. As to identity narratives, they were focused on either resistance to the evil elite-driven Islamization of Europe (Italy, Spain, Sweden) or pan-Slavic friendship with Russia based on traditional values (Bulgaria, Slovakia). Finally, problem narratives typically focussed on how the European Union has been destroying its own member states by means of disastrous and harmful policies, in particular the European Green Deal, the Common Agricultural Policy and migration policies.

Here, emphasis on a given policy varied depending on contextual factors relevant for the EU each member state analysed. FIMI narratives built around the green transition were very prominent in Poland and Italy – and significantly more so than in the previous European elections campaign of 2019. They are also very much present in France and Germany, albeit

coupled with other relevant topics in those countries, such as agriculture and energy, respectively. Anti-migration narratives featured prominently in Italy and Spain, and this is a constant feature of (dis)information space in these countries, as observed both during the 2019 and 2024 electoral campaigns.

A clear novelty, compared to the 2019 European election campaign, was the FIMI narration aimed at reducing the support of EU member states for Ukraine. In particular, French and German governments were targeted as war-mongers that – by offering military support to Ukraine – were dragging their own countries and citizens into war. In Slovakia a similar narrative was targeting the pro-European opposition. Another dimension of this very narrative consisted of targeting EU member states' governments for allegedly excessive support they were offering to Ukrainian refugees. As a result, practically all economic and social problems of respective EU member states were linked to the support for Ukraine and Ukrainians. A universal simplistic solution (moral of the story) that follows from this narrative logic is that electing radical right-wing political forces that would put an end to supporting Ukraine, would automatically solve most problems that Europeans currently face. Furthermore, exiting the European Union would solve the rest of them.

5.3.2 FIMI in European elections in 2019 and 2024: quantitative analysis

The main themes of disinformation such as portraying the EU as corrupt and authoritarian, as well as attacking climate and migration policies persisted from 2019 to 2024. However, the tactics and sophistication of these campaigns have significantly evolved.

Due to obvious reasons, i.e. significant technological advances in generative artificial intelligence models, there was a considerable increase in the use of AI-generated content, deepfakes, and synthetic media to create realistic-looking disinformation at scale in 2024, as compared to the 2019 European election campaign.

The main narrative difference between the 2019 and 2024 elections at the general EU level would be a different focus: in 2019, migration (and rather anti-migration) tropes were highly present before the EP election. In 2024, it was mostly the topics related to climate and energy policies, with a specific emphasis on farming, that were most often used.

Table 7. Calculation of mentions of selected narratives contained in secondary reports about 2019 and 2024 European elections

Narrative Category	2019: Number of Mentions	2024: Number of Mentions
The EU is a corrupt and authoritarian superstate	24	36
Immigration is an existential threat	22	25
The "globalist elite" controls everything	19	28
Elections are rigged and manipulated	18	31
Green/climate policies are tools of control	7	27

Source: *own study based on dataset provided by Debunk.org*

Moreover, additional narratives that were almost non-existent in 2019 but prominent in 2024 were identified. They are presented in the table below:

Table 8. Calculation of mentions of new narratives and techniques that appeared in secondary reports about 2019 and 2024 European elections

Narrative Category	2019 Mentions	2024 Mentions
AI/Tech-enabled manipulation (deepfakes, bots, AI content)	0	19
Climate "lockdowns" / eating insects, bans, etc.	3	18
Disinformation about voting mechanisms (postal, e-voting)	2	13
Direct attacks on EU election legitimacy	5	21

Source: *own study based on dataset provided by Debunk.org*

This comparison further proves the argument made at the beginning of this sub-chapter. The main differences include the growth in AI-generated disinformation, whereas the new narratives focus on climate and climate policies, as well as electoral disinformation - this includes both disinformation about voting mechanisms as well as direct attacks on EU election legitimacy.

Table 9. Calculation of mentions of top country-specific narratives that appeared in secondary reports about 2019 and 2024 European elections

Country	2019 Top Narrative: Mentions	2024 Top Narrative: Mentions
Germany	Anti-migration: 4	Anti-Ukraine: 8
France	Yellow Vests/Anti-elite: 3	Anti-climate/Anti-Ukraine: 6
Poland	Anti-EU sovereignty: 3	Mobilization/Ukraine scam: 7
Italy	Migration threat: 3	Pro-Russian party funding: 6

Source: *own study based on dataset provided by Debunk.org*

The analysis of country-specific narratives in four chosen countries for which the data was available reveals another important evolution. It seems that due to war-related FIMI activities, the focus shifted from generalized anti-migrant narration to a more specific anti-Ukrainian narration.

5.3.3. Quantitative case study: election fraud narrative

In order to provide a tentative assessment of the difference in the prominence of the *election fraud* narrative between the European Parliament election campaigns of 2019 and 2024, a quantative experiment was conducted based on the results from Meltwater. The experiment consisted of verifying the prominence of the term *election fraud* and its synonyms in the languages of the nine EU member states selected for the above qualitative analysis (see: subsection 5.2).

The election fraud narrative was chosen for two main reasons. First, it proved to be a prominent FIMI narrative across the EU member states. For example, both Doppelganger and Overload influence operations switched their focus to national elections when they were happening. Second, this narrative fits well into the main topic of the present section on the 2024 European elections, as it was present in all but one countries analysed. The dissemination of the narrative was analysed with regard to six days surrounding the 2024 European election (three days before, the election weekend, and the day after) as existing research shows that electoral mis- and disinformation tends to record highest engagement levels on these particular dates. The term was not analysed in English, as the focus was on primary sources, understood as country-specific debate online, and not the secondary sources, or resulting analysis of the narratives that might have been published in English. Sources included four social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube), but not TikTok, as the platform did not exist back in 2019.

Chart 14. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Bulgaria during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024
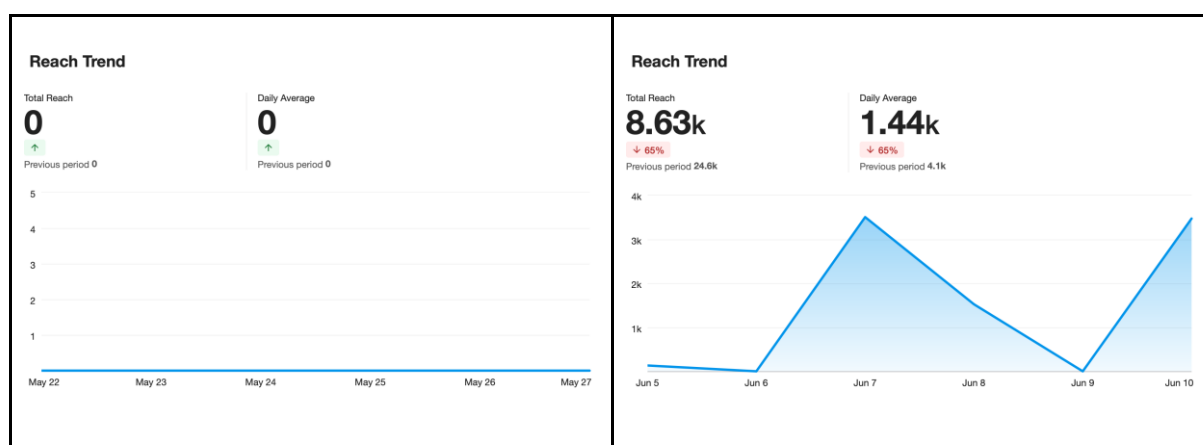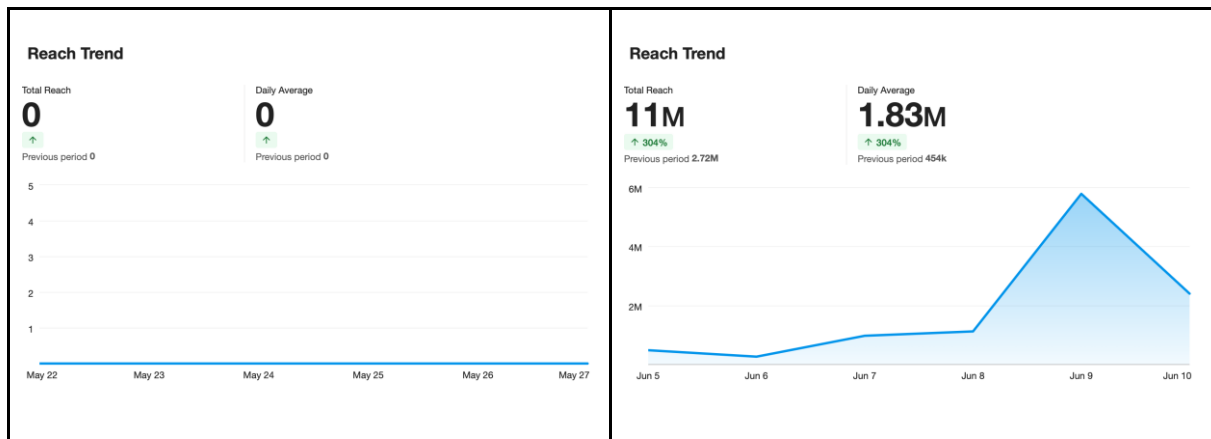

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 15. Reach of the election fraud narrative in France during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024
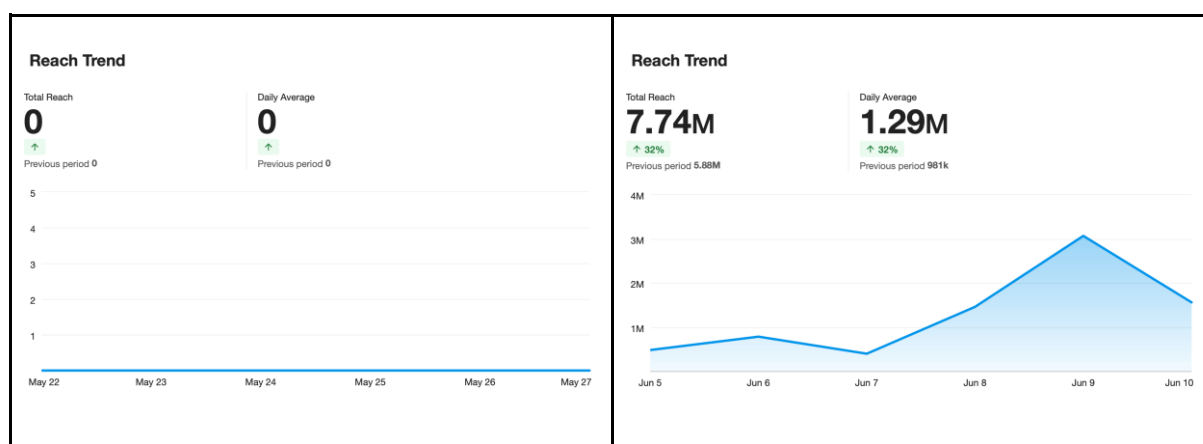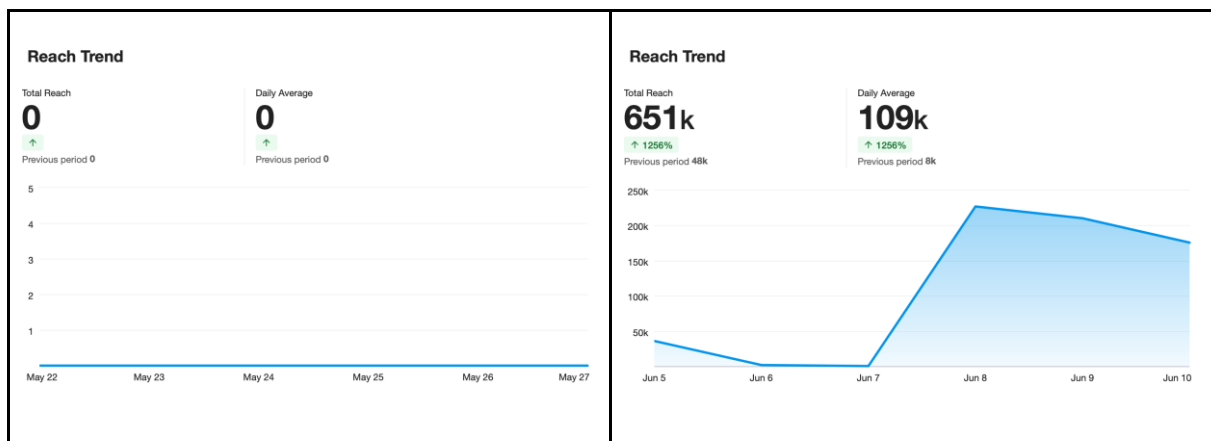

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 16. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Germany during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024
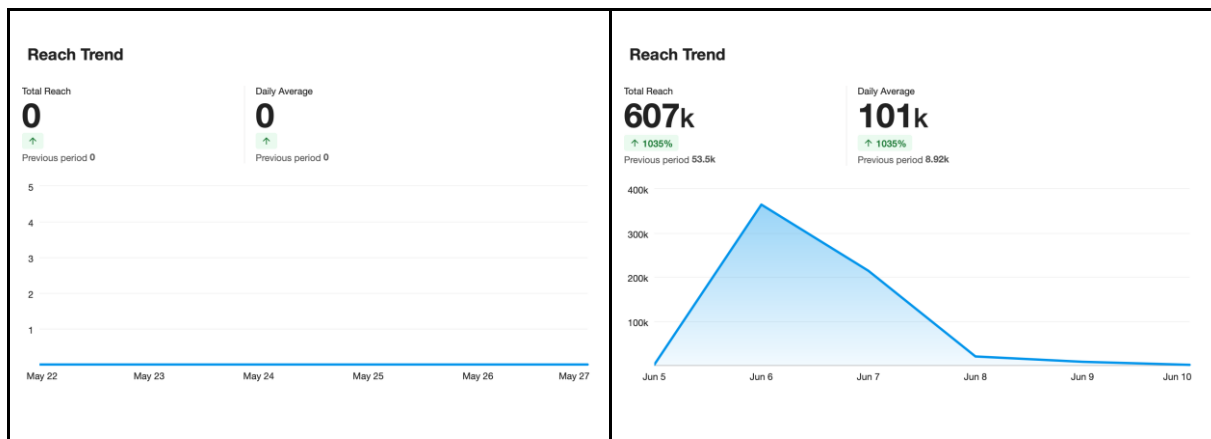

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 17. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Italy during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024
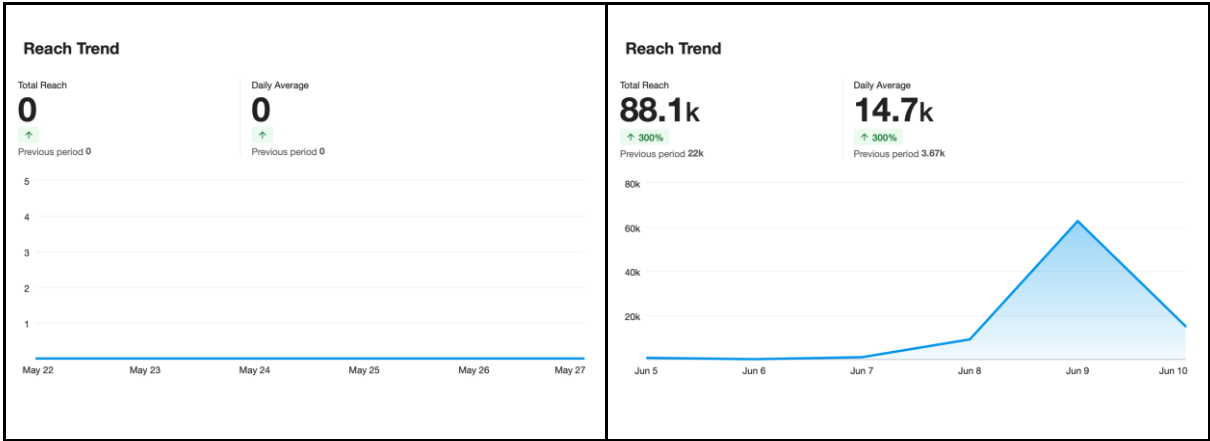

Source: own study

Chart 18. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Poland during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024
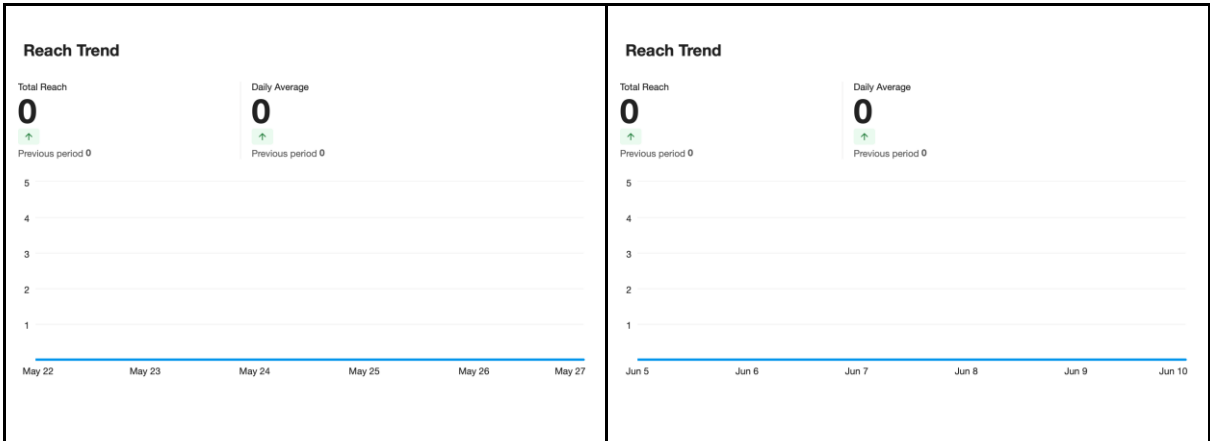

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 19. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Romania during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 20. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Slovakia during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 21. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Spain during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024
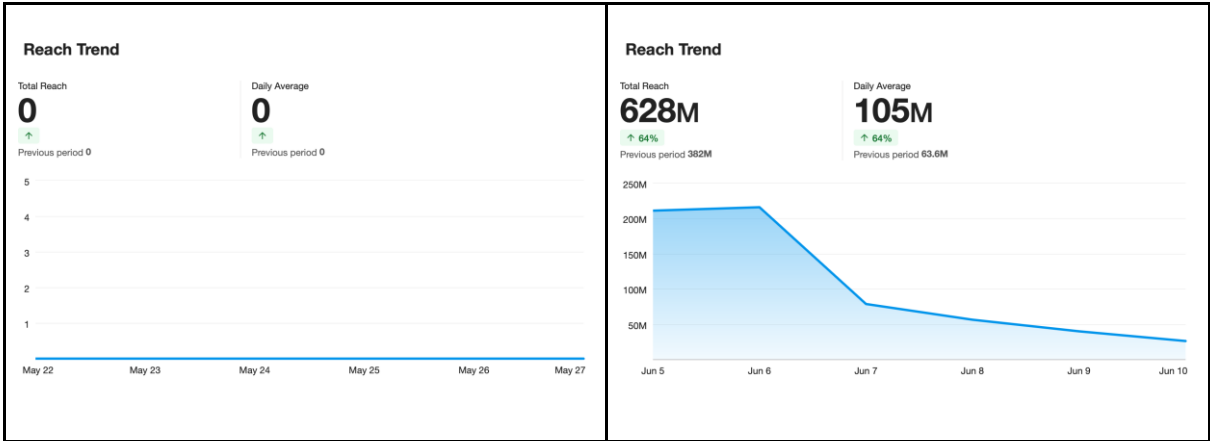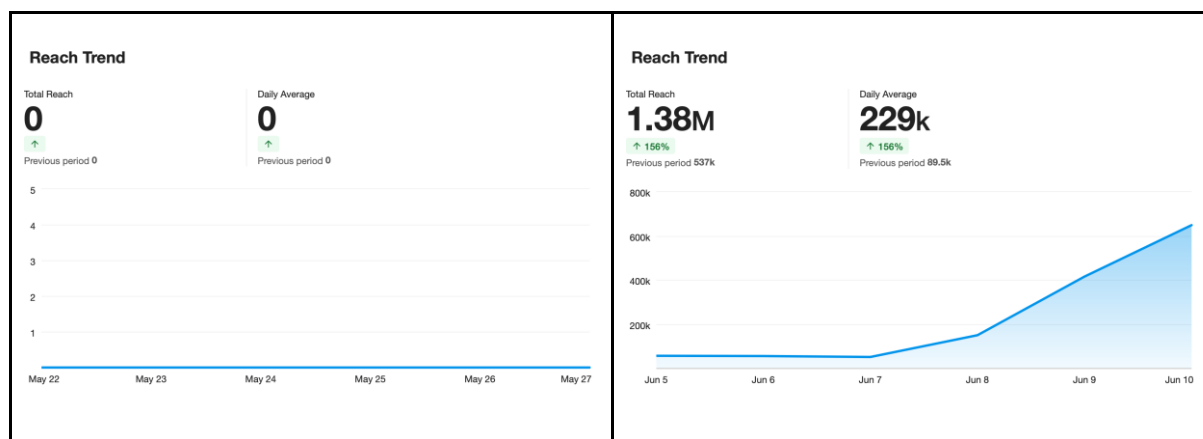

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

Chart 22. Reach of the election fraud narrative in Sweden during the 6 days around the EP election in 2019 and 2024

Source: *own study based on results from Meltwater*

The analysis shows, first, that in 2024 in the majority of the countries analysed the narrative about the election fraud gained popularity during the election weekend. That was the case for Romania, Italy, Germany and France, as well as Sweden. For some countries, the narrative achieved its peak before the election. That was the case for Poland and Spain.

Interestingly, such narratives were significantly less present in 2019. The tool used for the experiment encountered an issue, thus in case of all the analysed countries it seems as if the narrative did not exist at all during the 2019 European election campaign. However, manual analysis conducted to triangulate this result proved that there were some instances of the narrative about the rigged elections being disseminated in the context of the 2019 campaign, but they were minor and quite incomparable with the reach of the narrative achieved during the 2024 election campaign.

5.4 Conclusions and recommendations

In general, the analysis of the naratives disseminated during the 2024 European election campaign reveals concerning trends in the effectiveness of Russian FIMI narratives. Analysis demonstrates that these campaigns successfully exploited existing societal and political cleavages, particularly around support for Ukraine, EU climate and migration policies. The most significant impact appears to be in terms of normalisation and mainstreaming of the Eurosceptic and anti-establishment narratives, that in turn legitimize radical anti-systemic right-wing political forces in the EU member states, which openly call for the dismantling of the European Union, NATO, and the entire Western security and economic order.

The 2024 European election campaign revealed both the rapidly growing sophistication of Russia-attributed FIMI, and potential gaps in EU's defensive capabilities. Whilst no major disruption was reported, the significant evolution in AI-powered FIMI techniques and the emergence of new narrative themes call for a comprehensive reassessment of counter-FIMI strategies ahead of the 2029 European elections.

The current fragmented approach to FIMI detection across member states significantly hampers effective response capabilities. The EU should implement standardised FIMI analysis methodologies based on the DISARM-STIX framework, facilitating improved information-

sharing. Enhanced data-sharing protocols between national authorities, combined with real-time alert systems, would enable rapid coordinated responses to emerging threats.

A European network of specialised FIMI analysis units could be established to pool resources and expertise. This network would benefit from shared training programmes, standardised analytical tools, and joint threat assessment capabilities.

The development of compelling alternative narratives that address the underlying concerns exploited by FIMI campaigns is critical. The establishment of rapid response communication teams capable of deploying counter-narratives within hours of FIMI detection would significantly enhance defensive capabilities. Moreover, predicting disinformation narratives ahead of their spread in the traditional as well as social media is needed. The creation of counter narratives should follow.

The establishment of dedicated electoral FIMI response units during campaign periods would provide focused protection for democratic processes. These units should combine technical detection capabilities with rapid response coordination and public communication functions.

Real-time monitoring of electoral discourse across digital platforms, combined with automated alert systems for potential FIMI incidents, would enable immediate protective responses. Coordination mechanisms with electoral authorities, law enforcement, and judicial systems must be established to ensure comprehensive incident response.

Strengthening the rapid response mechanisms where both the European Commission, NGOs and platforms' (VLOPs) representatives could meet and exchange information is desired.

Finally, more research is urgently needed at the junction of AI-powered foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and domestic information manipulation and interference (DIMI), in order to fully understand both the threats to democratic processes and actionable responses in defence of electoral integrity in Europe and beyond.

Summary of the Report

The primary objective of the Study is to delineate the mechanisms through which FIMI narratives disrupt democratic cohesion, distort public discourse, manipulate perception, and erode the institutional and societal resilience of the European Union states.

This Report advances the state of knowledge on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference by integrating theory with empirical dilligence and precision. It provides a structured and actionable framework for understanding how malign actors exploit the information environment to pursue strategic goals. Through its focus on Russia as a case study and its application of narrative analysis across thematic domains—from war to migration to elections—it delivers critical insights for those tasked with defending democratic societies in a hybrid age. The Report aims to be not only a scholarly reference but also a blueprint for shaping truth-based information ecosystems and informed public policy in an era marked by epistemic uncertainty, ontologic disorientation and geopolitical contestation.

The authors' team has put a particular emphasis on the Russian Federation as a prototypical and persistent systemic actor operating in the broader spectrum of hybrid threats. Conceptually grounded in narrative theory and executed through a structured empirical approach, the Report systematically examines the architecture, evolution, content, and strategic utility of disinformation campaigns. It conceptualizes disinformation not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a key instrument of modern statecraft and asymmetric power projection, functioning on a daily basis below the threshold of and armed conflict.

The opening section of the Report lays the theoretical foundation by introducing a typology of disinformation narratives, distinguishing among *identity*, *systemic*, and *problem* narratives. These categories are defined by their thematic content, strategic function, and targeted societal effects. Identity narratives focus on collective memory, culture, and historical belonging; systemic narratives question the legitimacy and stability of political, legal, or institutional systems; and problem narratives target specific events or crises with distorted or false interpretations. This typological framework serves as a lens through which the complexity of FIMI can be parsed, categorized, and analyzed. Methodologically, the study employs narrative analysis as its principal tool, supported by structured data collection, classification procedures, and transparent verification protocols. A detailed discussion of data sources—including open-source media, social platforms, and state-aligned content repositories—is included to ensure analytical transparency and reproducibility.

The second part of the Study provides a detailed examination of the Russian Federation's strategic and operational engagement in the FIMI domain. Drawing from doctrinal sources, strategic communications, and observed behavior, it identifies Russia as a persistent and well-resourced state actor in the global information environment. This section maps out the long-term strategic objectives behind Russian disinformation campaigns, particularly in the post-Soviet and EU neighborhoods, and connects them to broader geopolitical aims. The Report outlines the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) commonly used by Russia, such as the use of state-controlled media, proxy information actors, covert amplification networks, and influence proxies embedded within diaspora communities or civil society institutions. The decentralized and adaptive nature of Russia's FIMI architecture—marked by its ability to exploit legal ambiguities, technological platforms, and social fault lines—is a key finding. The

hybridization of overt and covert, military and civilian, and domestic and foreign instruments of influence constitutes a central theme in this section.

The third section of the Report focuses specifically on Russian disinformation narratives related to the 2022 full-scale aggression against Ukraine. It introduces a hierarchical model of narrative organization, with a dominant metanarrative of Russian civilizational exceptionalism at the top. This overarching frame is operationalized through systemic narratives that portray Western institutions as morally bankrupt and politically illegitimate; identity narratives that position Ukraine as historically and culturally subordinate to Russia; and problem narratives that frame current events—such as NATO expansion or Western sanctions—as existential threats requiring urgent response. A focused case study on the narrative denying Ukraine's historical legitimacy as a sovereign nation illustrates how disinformation weaponizes history, emotion, and selective interpretation to justify military aggression and delegitimize Ukrainian statehood. This section also explores the narrative's adaptability to different audiences— domestic (within Russia), regional (in the post-Soviet space), and international (in the Global South or Western democracies).

The fourth part of the Report broadens the analytical scope to examine the use of migration as a tool of hybrid warfare, with a special emphasis on the 2021–2022 Belarus–Poland border crisis. The section introduces the concept of a *dual-track FIMI strategy*, in which conflicting social groups (e.g., pro- and anti-immigration audiences) are simultaneously targeted with divergent but complementary narratives, intensifying polarization and confusion. This disinformation technique seeks to exacerbate societal divisions and undermine policy coherence by weaponizing empathy on one hand and security fears on the other. The case study of the Egor Putilov affair exemplifies how disinformation actors manipulate migration narratives to simultaneously delegitimize governmental responses and provoke emotional overreaction. This section further includes an empirical reconstruction of the hybrid campaign surrounding the crisis, encompassing narrative mapping, audience segmentation, impact assessments, and policy-level implications. It concludes with targeted recommendations for EU and national authorities, including cross-sectoral coordination, enhanced border communication strategies, and early-warning systems.

The last part of the Study addresses the risks posed by FIMI to democratic institutions through electoral interference, focusing on the 2024 European Parliament elections. This section explores the ways in which foreign disinformation actors seek to manipulate voter behavior, erode public trust in democratic institutions, and foment polarization. Based on cross-national case studies in nine EU member states—France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia—the Report identifies recurring and locally tailored disinformation narratives. It shows how these narratives exploit context-specific grievances, historical traumas, and political cleavages. A comparative analysis with the 2019 elections reveals both continuity in core themes (e.g., narratives about election fraud, elite corruption, and foreign control) and evolution in tactics, including increased use of AI-generated content and encrypted messaging platforms. A deep dive into election fraud narratives demonstrates how disinformation evolves across electoral cycles, retaining its mobilizing potential even when previous claims have been debunked.

To ensure methodological rigor and facilitate replication, the **Report includes detailed appendices describing the tools and techniques used throughout the study**. These cover prompt design and output verification for large language model (LLM)-assisted analysis, typological criteria for narrative classification, and open-source verification protocols. These

technical annexes position the Report not only as an academic contribution but also as a practical guide for operational application.

Expected utility of the Report for multiple stakeholders

The authors envision this Report as a strategic resource for multiple stakeholder communities:

- **For scholars and analysts**, it offers a clear typology, replicable methodology, and a robust empirical base for future research on disinformation and hybrid threats.

- **For policymakers**, it provides grounded insights into the strategic logic of FIMI, the vulnerabilities it exploits, and the policy levers available for building resilience.

- **For security practitioners**, it details threat actor TTPs, campaign architectures, and response strategies essential for operational readiness and strategic planning.

- **For electoral bodies and civil society actors**, it furnishes comparative lessons on electoral interference and offers tools for safeguarding democratic processes.

- **For the wider public**, it indirectly contributes to greater digital awareness and media literacy, reinforcing societal capacity to detect and resist manipulation.

Appendices

Appendix 1: **Prompt Input and Query Examples for the EP 2024 Election in** [Exa.ai](Exa.ai)

Aanalyst Prompt Input	Exa.ai–Generated Query Clauses
Provide reports on foreign interference, election manipulation, election meddling, disinformation campaigns, and influence operations targeting the European Parliament 2024 elections. Compile information from news reports, social media analysis, and expert assessments, focusing on state and non-state actors engaged in influence operations. Covers state or non-state actors engaged in influence operations. Includes the following tactics: disinformation, fake news, AI-generated propaganda, media shaping, voter manipulation, hoaxes, election fraud claims, fake accounts, deepfakes, bots, psychological manipulation techniques, or any other tactics that fall under the DISARM framework. The article/report was published in 2024.	Focuses on foreign interference or influence operations targeting the European Parliament 2024 elections
	Includes information from news reports, social media analysis, or expert assessments
	Covers state or non-state actors engaged in influence operations
	Includes tactics such as disinformation, fake news, AI-generated propaganda, media shaping, voter manipulation, hoaxes, deepfakes, election
	Published in 2024

Appendix 2: Relevance Verification & Narrative Extraction Prompts (ChatGPT-4o) for the Ukrainian Refugees Dataset

Relevance Verification Prompt	Narrative Extraction Prompt
You are a disinformation-detection system. Task: decide whether an article describes foreign-attributed disinformation activity or messaging aimed at influencing perceptions, policy, or support regarding Ukrainians displaced by Russia's full-scale invasion (24 Feb 2022 → 31 Dec 2024). Judge only the article's content. ———————————— STEP 1 · Candidate-Message Table ———————————— After one read-through, list **every** statement, slogan, or narrative that the article says a foreign actor promotes. | # | Claim / narrative (quote, tight paraphrase, **or author-stated "narrative"**) | Foreign actor? | Dissemination channel / tactic | |---|--|--------------|-----------------------------| • Include rows even if the article merely	You are an analytical AI tasked with extracting only the foreign-promoted propaganda messages that readers or policymakers could actually see or hear about Ukrainian refugees (time-frame: 2022-02-24 – 2024-12-31). Do not summarise operations, methods, or analysis—capture the claims themselves. ———————————— STEP 1 · Internal Gate (all must be "Yes") ———————————— □ Is the message explicitly attributed or credibly linked to a foreign actor (state media, trolls, bots, proxies)? □ Is a specific false / misleading / manipulative claim, slogan, or framing (a) quoted, (b) tightly paraphrased, **or (c) explicitly identified by the author as a narrative the foreign actor is spreading** (e.g., "Russian trolls depict Ukrainian refugees as ungrateful and criminal")? □ Could this claim plausibly appear unedited in hostile propaganda

128

labels the theme

(e.g. "Kremlin outlets depict refugees as criminals").

• "Spread how" can be generic (Telegram, state TV, Facebook ads).

• Err on the side of inclusion.

If the table would be empty, skip the rest and output:

{
"Pre-check Result": "No",

"Reasoning": "No explicit claim, narrative, or example appears in the article."

}

STEP 2 · Mandatory Conditions (all 4 must pass)

1. **Foreign attribution**

≥ 1 row ties the claim to a foreign state, proxy, or state-linked media.

2. **Concrete content + channel**

≥ 1 row contains a specific claim / narrative **and** a dissemination method

(quote, tight paraphrase, **or author-identified narrative**) + channel.

3. **Ukrainian-refugee focus (post-invasion)**

At least one disinfo theme targets Ukrainian

(meme, post, headline)?

□ Is the claim directly connected to Ukrainian refugees

(arrival, resettlement, benefits, harms, policy impact)?

If ANY answer is "No", output exactly **{}** and stop.

——————————————————————————
————————————————

STEP 2 · Extraction Rules

——————————————————————————
————————————————

1. A concrete propaganda claim is present

– quoted, tightly paraphrased, **or clearly labelled as the narrative**.

2. The claim is false, misleading, or manipulative.

3. A foreign actor is the promoter.

4. It targets or influences perceptions, attitudes, or policy

regarding Ukrainian refugees.

Additional rules

• Multiple-claim sentence → list each claim separately.

• Single-mention claim → still list it if it is a unique trope

(e.g., "Ukrainian refugees spread infectious diseases").

Do **NOT** extract if the text contains only:

129

refugees / Ukrainians abroad

in context of Russia's 2022 invasion.

Refugee angle must be central, not incidental; pieces solely on

"weaponised migration" without refugee-specific claims do **not** qualify.

4. **Credible non-opinion source**

Recognised news outlet, academic / NGO / gov report, not an op-ed.

If any condition fails → `"Pre-check Result": "No"`.

STEP 3 · Output (strict JSON)

{

"Pre-check Result": "Yes" or "No",

"Reasoning": "One concise sentence citing foreign attribution, concrete claim + channel, refugee relevance, and source credibility."

}

Facts about channels • Analyst meta-wording without a claim •

Legitimate opinions • Unrelated migration topics • Technical methods •

Pure summaries or metadata.

_____

STEP 3 · Narrative Handling

_____

• List every valid propaganda theme in first-person propagandist style

(e.g., "Ukrainian refugees are flooding our country and stealing jobs").

• Separate themes with "; " (semicolon + space).

• Leave blank if no theme qualifies.

_____

STRICT JSON OUTPUT

_____

{

"Narrative": ""

}

Example with six themes

{

"Narrative": "Ukrainian refugees are privileged and take resources from locals; Kyiv's refugees bring extremist ideology to Europe; Our own citizens are left homeless while Ukrainians get free housing; Harboring Ukrainian refugees

	spreads nationalist militancy across the continent; Ukrainian refugees are spreading diseases; Ukrainian refugees are uncultured and lazy and don't want to work"
	}

***Appendix 3*: Inclusion vs. Exclusion Based on Presence of Specific Narratives (the Invasion of Ukraine Dataset)**

Criterion	Included Article: *France reveals a "structured and coordinated Russian propaganda network" targeting Europe and the United States*	Excluded Article: *France accuses Russia of disinformation campaign against Ukraine's allies*
Foreign attribution	Yes — explicitly describes Russian disinformation efforts coordinated by a state-linked actor.	Yes — describes Russian involvement in a disinformation campaign.
Narrative presence	✅ **Multiple concrete propaganda messages are quoted or tightly paraphrased**, including claims that French soldiers are dying en masse in Ukraine and "France is calling for radical measures against Zelensky."	✖**No specific messages are quoted, paraphrased, or labeled.** Only general reference to a Russian campaign against Ukraine's allies.
War relevance	Yes — messages directly target perceptions of Ukraine, the war, and Western support, within the relevant time window.	Yes — general reference to Ukraine and its allies, but no narrative payloads.
Meets inclusion criteria	✅ **Included** — clear disinformation narratives related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine are present.	✖**Excluded** — no extractable claims; lacks specific messaging content.

Appendix 4: **Uniform Narrative and Message Categories per Thematic Dataset(s)**

4.1 EP Parliament Election 2024 and EP Parliament Election 2019[324]

1. The EU is a corrupt and authoritarian superstate

- Democracy in the EU is just a performance for the cameras
- Countries that disagree with the EU are punished financially
- Brussels elites attack ordinary lifestyles and force austerity
- The EU is beyond reform and must be dismantled and rebuilt
- Brussels imposes ideologies that destroy local culture
- EU bureaucrats live in luxury while citizens struggle

2. Only anti-system parties can save the nation

- The system silences real opposition through fake scandals
- Nationalist voices are being erased from the political debate
- The only hope is in outsiders who refuse EU orders
- AfD and other patriots are smeared with fake "Russian money" stories
- The deep state fears true patriots gaining power

3. Western democracies are collapsing morally and socially

- EU spends billions abroad while schools and pensions collapse
- Governments give refugees free pensions while citizens suffer
- Children are taught to hate their own culture and identity
- Degeneracy is promoted while faith and tradition are mocked

4. Eastern European sovereignty is under attack

- Local governments only obey Brussels and Washington
- Poles, Slovaks, Romanians are drafted into foreign wars by Brussels
- The EU wants to turn Eastern Europe into its colony
- Eastern countries are punished for defending their values
- EU enlargement to Ukraine will crush local farmers and jobs*

5. Ukraine is a Western puppet and the war is a scam

- Europe is tired of funding a lost war that only fuels inflation*
- The West is using Ukraine to attack Russia
- Ukrainians are dying for U.S. weapons companies*

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[324] To ensure consistency and comparability, we applied the same narrative taxonomy to both the 2019 and 2024 European Parliament election datasets. While the classification framework remained constant, some messages appeared exclusively in one dataset or the other. Messages marked with an asterisk (*) were observed only in the 2024 dataset; those marked with a double asterisk (**) appeared only in 2019.

- NATO provoked the war and now blames others
- Zelensky acts on orders from Washington, not Kyiv
- The Ukraine war is a distraction from EU failures*
- Sanctions raise energy bills but do nothing to stop the war*
- Ukraine refugees get VIP treatment while EU citizens pay the price

6. Mainstream media is fake and controlled

- Every major outlet reads from the same script
- Independent media is targeted by smear campaigns
- Western governments sabotage infrastructure, then blame Russia on TV

7. Immigration is an existential threat

- Migrants are used to replace the native population
- Ukrainian refugees get benefits denied to German families*
- Migrants are flooding Europe by design
- Crime rises wherever mass migration is allowed
- Governments protect illegal migrants more than citizens

8. Traditional values are being destroyed

- Traditional families are being taxed into extinction
- Masculinity is demonized and tradition erased
- The West has abandoned God and celebrates perversion

9. Authoritarian regimes offer real strength

- Putin defends real values while the West kneels
- China gets results while Europe debates pronouns*
- Strong leaders protect tradition and security
- Liberal democracy is weak and chaotic

10. Elections are rigged and manipulated

- These elections will be manipulated, so don't bother voting
- The system is designed to keep real change out
- Media brainwashes voters and silences dissent

11. The "globalist elite" controls everything

- Global elites are orchestrating wars and crises for profit
- WEF is the real government of Europe*
- Brussels sells laws to the highest Russian bidder behind the public's back

12. Climate policies are tools of control

- Green transition is a scam pushing EU citizens into poverty*

- Green policies are destroying jobs and industries*
- Farmers are being sacrificed for carbon taxes
- The climate crisis is a hoax to control populations
- Climate lockdowns are the next phase of control*

13. Brussels fabricates the 'Russia threat' to silence opposition

- Interference "scandals" are staged to ban patriots from the EP race
- The EU invents Kremlin plots to hide its own corruption
- Smearing candidates as "Moscow agents" is Brussels' censorship weapon*

14. Voting in the EP elections is physically dangerous

- Authorities can't guarantee your safety in the booths*
- ETA plans to attack polling stations in Spain during EU elections*
- Terror plots will strike on election day; only fools will risk going**

15. Muslim migrants are weaponised to sway the EP vote

- Mass migration is engineered to flip EP districts
- Brussels imports voters who will obey globalist masters

16. Sanctions and energy policy are destroying Europe

- Sanctions raise energy and living costs for Europeans, helping no one
- Restoring cheap Russian energy would solve Europe's crisis overnight*
- The EU forces energy austerity while elites keep warm and rich*
- Brussels created the energy crisis, then blames Russia to distract voters*
- Lifting sanctions is the only way to save Europe from economic collapse

---

4.2 Weaponised migration crisis on the EU–Belarus border

1. EU border states commit atrocities against migrants

- Polish and Lithuanian guards beat, rob, and torture refugees at the frontier
- Dead migrants are buried in secret mass graves in the forest
- Push-backs, electric shocks, and dog attacks make the EU a human-rights abuser

2. Belarus is a humanitarian victim, unfairly blamed for the crisis

- Belarus provides food and shelter; claims of "weaponised migration" are a Western myth
- Minsk is reacting to EU sanctions, not creating the crisis
- The "hybrid attack" narrative is EU propaganda to deflect from its own abuses

3. The West manufactured the border crisis as a pretext for aggression

- Poland invented the crisis to justify military build-up
- Lithuania uses migration narratives to invite NATO escalation
- The West stages the spectacle to keep sanctions and threaten Belarus/Russia

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4.3 Full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine

1. Ukraine is a Nazi / fascist state that must be de-Nazified

- Ukraine is ruled by Nazi sympathisers who oppress minorities
- Russia's operation is liberating Ukraine from neo-Nazis
- Azov and similar units prove the regime is fascist

2. Secret U.S. bioweapon labs operate in Ukraine

- Pentagon-funded labs in Ukraine are creating biological weapons
- Kyiv is developing chemical and biological weapons for war
- The West hides the truth; Russia is exposing the labs

3. West wages Proxy War Against Russia

- NATO's eastward expansion was a deliberate provocation
- The 'Collective West' is directing a proxy assault on Russia
- The West left Russia no choice but to defend itself

4. Russia intervened to stop genocide of Russian speakers

- Kyiv committed genocide in Donbas for eight years
- Russian-speaking civilians were shelled daily by Ukraine
- Moscow had to protect its people from extermination

5. Russia is carrying out Humanitarian Liberation of Russian-Speakers

- This is a 'special military operation,' not an invasion
- Russian Army is saving Russian-speaking Ukrainians from Kyiv's oppression
- Russia's actions are humanitarian intervention

6. Ukraine has no true statehood and is historically Russian land

- Ukraine is not a real nation; it has always been part of Russia
- Crimea and Donbas returned home through legal referendums
- Ukrainians and Russians are one people divided by the West
- Modern Ukraine is an artificial creation of Bolshevik Russia

7. Western Sanctions Backfire on Europe

- Europe's (economic and/or energy) crisis is self-inflicted by anti-Russian sanctions
- Nord Stream sabotage reveals Western sabotage of Russian gas
- Food and fertiliser shortages in Europe stem from Western policies
- While Europe crumbles, Russia's economy remains strong and booming

8. Ukrainian Leadership Is Inept and Corrupt

- Zelensky is a Western puppet—rumored to be on drugs
- Kyiv's government is inept, corrupt and/or on the verge of collapse
- Ukrainian troops are deserting, surrendering en masse
- Western-supplied weapons are already destroyed or ineffective
- Zelensky and his family buy luxury property and yachts with aid funds

9. Kyiv Fabricates Russian Atrocities

- The Bucha massacre, Mariupol hospital strike etc. were staged
- Ukraine's own artillery kills its civilians for propaganda
- Claims of genocide against Russian-speakers are baseless lies
- Civilian casualty figures are wildly exaggerated by Kyiv

10. Ukrainian military commits atrocities and war crimes

- Ukrainian soldiers/Western mercenaries torture POWs and execute civilians
- Kyiv's forces shell their own cities and blame Russia
- Ukrainian units loot and terrorise liberated areas
- Ukrainian troops hide in schools and hospitals, forcing return fire

11. Western weapons fuel corruption and black-market crime

- U.S./EU arms shipped to Ukraine end up on the black market
- Aid money is stolen by Ukrainian officials and oligarchs
- Western taxpayers fund corruption, not victory

12. Ukrainian refugees are a burden to host countries

- Refugees take jobs and housing from native citizens
- Ukrainian refugees drain welfare budgets and social services
- Crime rises wherever Ukrainian refugees settle

13. Peace talks, not weapons, are needed—military aid only escalates the war

- The war can only end through negotiations; arms prolong the bloodshed
- Western weapons escalate the conflict and kill more Ukrainians
- Stopping aid would force Kyiv to the negotiating table and save lives

14. Western Media and Tech Are Anti-Russian

- Western outlets and journalists lie and censor genuine Russian perspectives
- Russophobia is a weapon unleashed by European elites
- Those, who speak the truth about Russia, are silenced

15. Ukraine persecutes the Orthodox Church and believers

- Kyiv bans the canonical Orthodox Church and seizes monasteries
- Priests are jailed while Nazi collaborators are honoured
- Russia defends Christianity against Kyiv's repression

16. The West is morally corrupt and promotes perversion

- Western societies have abandoned God and tradition
- LGBTQ ideology is forced onto children and institutions
- Degeneracy is celebrated while faith and family are mocked

4.4 Ukrainian refugees

1. Ukrainian refugees are violent or criminal

- Ukrainians endanger public safety and commit serious crimes across Europe
- Refugees are raping, stabbing, or killing locals
- They commit arson and assault authorities
- Crime has risen dramatically since their arrival

2. Ukrainian refugees are economic parasites

- They exploit social systems and take resources from locals
- Refugees get more benefits than citizens or veterans
- They live in luxury while taxpayers struggle
- They abuse welfare and get free services everywhere

3. Ukrainian refugees are fake or undeserving

- Most are scammers, rich elites, or opportunists—not real refugees
- They drive BMWs and wear designer clothes
- Men fleeing conscription pretend to be vulnerable
- They're not escaping war, just avoiding responsibility

4. Ukrainian refugees are culturally disrespectful

- They insult national traditions, symbols, and identity
- They deface monuments and national symbols
- They refuse to integrate or learn the language

- They expect locals to adapt to *them*

5. Ukrainian refugees are neo-Nazis or extremists

- They bring fascist ideology and glorify WWII collaborators
- Azov and other Nazi-linked groups hide among civilians
- Refugees openly support Banderite ideology
- They pose a political threat to democratic values

6. Ukrainian refugees are spreading disease

- Their arrival creates a public health crisis
- They carry tuberculosis and other infections
- Hospitals are overwhelmed by refugee cases
- They pose a health risk to children and the elderly

7. Ukrainian refugees are part of an elite conspiracy

- Governments and elites are secretly using them to reshape society
- Authorities collect refugee data for surveillance
- Refugees are used to justify increased social control
- Political leaders want to replace citizens with obedient outsiders

8. Ukrainian men should be deported and forced to fight

- They are draft-dodgers hiding in Europe while others die
- Men must be sent back to Ukraine to defend their country
- Western nations harbor deserters and cowards
- It's unjust to protect those unwilling to fight

9. Russia treats refugees better than the West

- Ukraine's people prefer Russia, which offers safety and dignity
- More refugees go to Russia than to Europe
- Russian regions provide better support and respect
- The West only pretends to care about Ukrainians

10. Ukrainian refugees are destabilizing Europe

- Their presence leads to political, social, and economic chaos
- They create tension between nations and within societies
- Their mass arrival is a deliberate destabilization tactic
- Europe is paying the price for backing Ukraine

4.5 Ukraine peace negotiations

1. The West sabotages peace negotiations

- The U.S. and UK pressured Ukraine to keep fighting instead of negotiating
- A peace deal was nearly signed in 2022, but the West stopped it

2. Ukraine refuses peace and sacrifices its own people

- Kyiv has rejected every realistic peace offer since 2014
- Zelensky could have ended the war but chose escalation

3. Russia genuinely wants peace but is ignored

- Putin has repeatedly offered peace — no one listened
- Russia paused offensives for negotiations; Ukraine refused

4. False-flag atrocities fabricated to derail peace

- Bucha was a staged event to stop peace talks
- War crimes "evidence" appears every time peace is near

5. Ukraine conceals massive battlefield losses to justify keeping the war going
- Kyiv conceals the real death toll from its own people
- Casualties are hidden so the war can continue with public backing

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