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<u>Master's Diploma Thesis</u>

The Extent of Russia's Information Warfare Capabilities: A Danger to the West and the Global World Order

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The author of this thesis, Antoine Lopez, hereby declares that this thesis is his own work, and that all references have correctly been stated using the Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition, as a referencing system.

This thesis was written for the purposes of the assignment alone, and no segments of text have been used in prior works.

______________________________ **Date**: 02.08.2022

Abstract

This thesis examines the extent of Russian information warfare efforts targeted at the West in recent years, highlighting the strategic use of information warfare by Russia to destabilize the West. Information warfare, which consists of but is not limited to disinformation, misinformation, demoralization, and psychological operations, as well as the overall concept of revisionism, and sources of revisionist thought in modern Russia, are detailed through a theoretical discussion. This discussion highlights the cultural and geographically based notions that blur a wholistic understanding of these concepts, particularly in their Russian application. Four case studies, focusing on Russian information warfare attempts surrounding COVID-19, migration crises, and the ongoing war in Ukraine, serve to demonstrate the danger posed by Russia's information warfare capabilities, by analyzing the origins, goals, targets, and methods of these attempts. The research conducted leads to multiple conclusions. First, Russian information warfare campaigns are successful when they exploit existing feelings or emotions but have so far not been able to create entirely new ones, whether anger or fear. Second, recent proactive efforts to thwart Russian information warfare in the West have so far been successful. Third, Russia is now quickly adapting to these new conditions, which would hint that Russia's revisionist information warfare attempts targeting the West are not disappearing, but simply undergoing a change of methods, goals, and targets.

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá rozsah ruského úsilí v oblasti informační války zaměřeného na Západ v posledních letech a zdůrazňuje strategické využití informační války ze strany Ruska k destabilizaci Západu. Informační válka, která se mimo jiné skládá z dezinformací, dezinformací, demoralizace a psychologických operací, stejně jako celkový koncept revizionismu a zdroje revizionistického myšlení v současném Rusku, jsou podrobně popsány prostřednictvím teoretické diskuse. Tato diskuse zdůrazňuje kulturní a geograficky založené pojmy, které rozostřují celistvé chápání těchto konceptů, zejména v jejich ruské aplikaci. Čtyři případové studie, zaměřené na ruské pokusy o informační válku kolem COVID-19, migrační krize a probíhající války na Ukrajině, slouží k demonstraci nebezpečí, které představují ruské schopnosti informační války, a to prostřednictvím analýzy původu, cílů, cílů a metod těchto pokusů. Provedený výzkum vede k několika závěrům. Za prvé, ruské kampaně informační války jsou úspěšné, pokud využívají existujících pocitů nebo emocí, ale zatím se jim nepodařilo vytvořit zcela nové, ať už jde o hněv nebo strach. Za druhé, nedávné proaktivní snahy o zmaření ruské informační války na Západě byly dosud úspěšné. Zatřetí, Rusko se nyní rychle přizpůsobuje novým podmínkám, což by naznačovalo, že ruské revizionistické pokusy o informační válku zaměřené na Západ nezanikají, ale pouze procházejí změnou metod, cílů a cílových skupin.

Key Words

Information warfare, psychological operations, revisionism, Russia, COVID-19, migration, Ukraine

Klíčová Slova

Informační válka, psychologické operace, revizionismus, Rusko, COVID-19, migrace, Ukrajina

Title

The Extent of Russia's Information Warfare Capabilities: A Danger to the West and the Global World Order

Název Práce

Rozsah ruských schopností informační války: Nebezpečí pro Západ a globální světový řád

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1. Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, leading to the end of the Cold War, it was theorized that the Western-led, liberal democratic world order, would become cemented as the new status quo; this theory being famously dubbed 'the end of history' (Fukuyama 1989). This theory claimed that mankind had reached its 'ideological evolution', leading to an unlikelihood of conflict and rivalry amongst states (Ibid). However, in the last two decades, Western liberal democracies have seen a major increase in information warfare campaigns carried out by the Kremlin's security apparatus, across a broad spectrum of methods, tactics, and goals.

From the alleged protection of ethnic Russian minorities in the Baltics, to the COVID-19 pandemic, or the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the events which precede it, Western liberal societies are routinely subjected to information warfare campaigns. These campaigns are used to sow distrust and discord at the heart of Western liberal democracies, with the sole aim of creating fractures and cleavages in societies, in what resembles a modern-day equivalent of the ancient Roman '*divide et impera'* idea: to divide and conquer.

This problem has been acknowledged since the cyber-attacks on Estonia in 2007, where Russia was accused of employing cyber-attacks to disrupt infrastructure, and to deface government websites, as well as to sow ethnic tensions through disinformation (Mansfield-Devine 2012). It was further acknowledged when the Russian application of information and cyber capabilities, used in conjunction with military force, were observed in Georgia in 2008, after Russia invaded and annexed parts of the country under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians (Allison 2008).

It can be argued that it became a major public concern during the 2016 United States of America (henceforth US) presidential elections, where Russian meddling through social media campaigns sought to influence election results and worsen societal divisions (Persily 2017). Other occurrences of Russian information warfare include the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the aftermath of the downing of flight MH17, or election interference and meddling in France and Germany in 2017, the 2015 migrant crisis, the 2021-2022 Belarus migration crisis, and most recently the ongoing war in Ukraine (Iasiello 2017; Braghiroli & Makarychev 2017; Posetti & Matthews 2018; Rietjens 2019; Filipec 2022; Treyger et al. 2022).

This use of information warfare by Russia has been portrayed to be an organized, institutional, and invincible beast, and though it has posed many security threats to those targeted, it would appear the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February of 2022 has diminished those views. A common consensus in Western media has emerged, stating that Russia is losing the information war in Ukraine (Talant 2022), which Ukraine is winning by a far margin (Cockerell 2022). Why has Russia performed so poorly in the information war in Ukraine, when it has in the past succeeded in transforming ideological battlefields?

In this thesis, a juxtaposition of Russian information warfare campaigns aimed at the West before the invasion of Ukraine, and attempts at doing the same during the war, will serve to highlight to what degree Russia's information warfare capabilities are a genuine problem, or whether a mythos has emerged about what Russia can do through subversion and manipulation. To do this, the key concepts included in the umbrella term 'information warfare' will be expanded upon, with historical examples to highlight them.

Furthermore, the 'West' in this context, is an amalgamation of Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, also known as 'the Western civilization' (Kurth 2003). Thus, the West includes: the European Union (henceforth EU) member states, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (henceforth NATO) members and what Russia considers 'unfriendly' states such as Switzerland, which is member of neither organization. This use of the term 'the West' was specifically chosen because it appears so often in Russian rhetoric.

Following this, Russian information warfare campaigns aimed at Western democracies before February 24th, 2022, the day the invasion of Ukraine began, will be analyzed, to understand the goals, methods, and impact. Then, the same will be done focusing on the Russian information warfare campaigns aimed at the West, regarding the situation in Ukraine. Finally, an analysis of how and why these campaigns are seemingly more efficient in certain scenarios will be conducted.

2. Research Targets and Goals

The goals of this thesis are two-pronged: first, to critically assess the existence, goals, and effect of Russian information warfare campaigns aimed at 'the West' prior to the invasion of Ukraine, using case studies to highlight goals, methods and the opportunities based on real-world events. Second, a comparison will be made with the attempted information warfare campaigns concerning the ongoing war in Ukraine. This thesis thus aims to establish the danger posed by Russian information warfare campaigns, specifically those aimed at the West, to analyze when and why it is successful, and when it is less so.

2.1 Research Goals: Main Question and Sub-Questions

The overarching research question of this analysis is as follows: '*To what extent are Russia's Information Warfare capabilities a danger to the West and the global world order?*'. This main and broad question will serve to establish the origins, the threat, how these information warfare campaigns are enacted, and when possible, what effect they have on the intended target(s).

As part of this question are sub-questions, which will focus on specific case studies, to provide the best analysis possible based on empirical evidence. These sub questions are:

- *How does Russia perform information warfare campaigns against the West?*
- *What is the goal of these campaigns?*
- *Who do these campaigns target?*
- *What effects do these campaigns have?*
- *Are these information warfare campaigns a threat to the global world order?*

In the first half of this project, a literature review will highlight and cover the main concepts related to this project: information warfare, psychological operations, and revisionism. Following this, empirical evidence will be used to demonstrate the effects of Russian information warfare campaigns targeted towards 'the West' on two recent case studies: the campaign surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, and the campaign surrounding the 2015 and the 2021 Belarus migration crises. In the second part, empirical evidence will be used to demonstrate what Russian information warfare campaigns aimed at the West have attempted and or achieved regarding the ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

2.2 Methodology

The case studies are chosen due to how recent they are, therefore lacking an academic focus. This is a limitation as it means that, in comparison with much older potential case studies, e.g., focusing on Soviet-era information warfare, primary sources are essentially nonexistent. However, a decent number of secondary sources do exist, in the form of governmental, supra-governmental and think tank reports, as well as scientific articles, books and journalistic investigations, which have extensively covered them.

Two case studies shall first be analyzed critically to demonstrate what Russian information warfare campaigns resemble when they are targeting the West during peace time, to establish the goals, extent, tactics, and effects. On top of painting a picture which will explain the intricate mechanisms of these campaigns, the analysis will serve to highlight effectiveness and to discuss whether these campaigns accomplished their intended purpose.

Following this, two case studies concerning the information warfare campaigns aimed at the West, while the war in Ukraine is ongoing, will be used to compare analytically to the other case studies what is working, what is not, and why. It is considered applicable to choose case studies during peace time and during war time, as the goals, as shall be demonstrated, are the same: sowing divisions and changing narratives, to create a weaker 'West'.

This set of case studies will serve to highlight and illustrate not only the existence but also the mechanism, and when possible, the effects of Russian information warfare campaigns against the West. Thus, information warfare, psychological operations and revisionism will be used as tools to observe, through a lens, an empirical phenomenon, as shown in the case studies, meaning that the conceptual definitions and discussion serve to structure the empirical analysis. All these case studies have specifically been chosen because they are recent and arguably under-researched in academia, and because a wide array of information enables for more valid comparison of goals, techniques, and effects, used by Russia in information warfare campaigns.

A limited quantitative analysis based on existing academic literature and social media analytics, found by either academic researchers or investigate journalists, will be provided when possible. For example, while some academics rely on open-source analytics from Twitter (Bail et al. 2017), others rely on Latent Dirichlet Allocation or LDA (Johnson & Marcellino 2021), a topic

model which serves to attribute given topics to sets of documents, in this case output from Russian-state owned media outlets and proxy-outlets.

Two main limitations are observable here: first, the reliance on secondary sources, due to the secretive nature of intelligence operations. For example, the EU's 'EUvsDisinfo' project is used extensively as a reference; it is a crucial organization in countering Russian information warfare narratives, but it is also one of few organizations engaging in this, hence the extensive use. Yet, the 'EUvsDisinfo' project not only identifies Russian disinformation attempts, but also produces verifiable evidence to counter them. Second, the focus of case studies on recent and or ongoing events imply that limited analysis has been done, whether at the levels of think-tanks, governments, or academia.

Yet, with the combination of academic literature, applied research from the field, and developing stories through various media, reasonable arguments can be made to provide a strong answer to the research question.

To establish a good comprehension of all the key terms and concepts, a literature review will first be conducted. This section will at length explain the concept of information warfare and psychological operations, as they are both crucial to understanding key concepts used throughout this thesis. After this, the concept of revisionism and its roots in modern Russia will be explained, to understand why this confrontation through information warfare campaigns is enacted to begin with.

3. Literature Review

This section will analyze and define concepts that are at the core of this thesis. To do so, literature will be assessed and reviewed to provide a full understanding of the concepts, as well as their historical background in the context of Russian information warfare campaigns. Furthermore, real examples will be intermixed with the literature to provide a wholistic picture to the latter case studies.

3.1 Information Warfare

Information warfare has been a key component of 21st century conflict, defined from high-intensity kinetic combat to 'hybrid warfare'. Though it is paramount to conflict in the digital era, where information flows at gigabits per second, information warfare can be traced as far back as 2500 years ago, in the works of Sun-Tzu. However, as important to current thinking the concept may be, it is a contested term, with equally contested definitions.

In the simplest terms, "information warfare is the offensive and defensive use of information and information systems to deny, exploit, corrupt, or destroy an adversary's knowledge, communications, and perceptive access and processes" (Singer 2001, n.p.). There is a wide array of literature on the definition, means, implications and theory of information warfare, and the goal of this section is taking an in depth look at some to establish a strong understanding.

The idea of information 'warfare' is contested, for multiple reasons. First, it is said that the term originates from a series of mistranslations between Russian and English, with the original phrasing being more akin to 'information confrontation', 'information counter-struggle' or 'information rivalry' (Pynnöniemi 2019). Furthermore, some of the nomenclature originates in Russia, but it has been argued that mistranslations have missed the Russian rhetoric behind the original wording, which implies that Russia is countering foreign information 'warfare' (Ibid).

Second, the use of the term 'warfare' implies a kinetic fight. The definition of the term warfare, as per the Cambridge dictionary is "the activity of fighting a war" (Cambridge 2022). The Correlates of War, an academic project on warfare history, defines a war as "sustained combat, involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of 1,000 battle-related fatalities

(later specified as 1,000 battle-related fatalities within a twelve month period) (Singer 2001, 1).

Though the term is contested by some academics based on these two main critiques, it has become part of military and political lexicon, which also relate to 'information operations' (Pynnöniemi 2019). For example, the US government does not have an official definition of information warfare (CRS 2020). The Congressional Research Service, (CRS) which presents research and advises on policy or legal analysis to the US congress, mention that the term information warfare is most often used to define "a strategy for the use and management of information to pursue a competitive advantage, including both offensive and defensive operations" (CRS 2020, n.p.). Strategy in this sense is explained as "the process of planning to achieve objectives and goals in the national interest" (Ibid). The CRS also define the link between information warfare and operations as the latter being the output of an information warfare strategy (Ibid).

Furthermore, it is important to delineate information warfare (henceforth IW) from cyber warfare; in a digitalized world, where information flows freely through the internet, some experts equate the two, placing them alongside one another as 'adjacent concepts'. Whereas cyber warfare uses information systems as the means to pursue objectives, information is the weapon and not merely a vessel (Whyte et al. 2021). Yet, academics have mentioned that the Russian doctrine pits the two so closely that to assess resources and capabilities, based on limited public documentation, separating the two is difficult, as documentation is so scarce (Treyger et al. 2022).

Thus, IW can be defined as "the deliberate manipulation or use of information by one party on an adversary to influence the choices and decisions that the adversary makes in order for military or strategic gain" (Whyte et al. 2021, 2). Importantly, this definition highlights that IW is broad. While one may obtain information through long-range thermal optics on a high-altitude unmanned aerial system and publicly release it, another party may for example manipulate information presented in the form of news, for their own subversive gains.

Yet, as far away as those two examples may be, they are under the same umbrella term. This last point is particularly important. As per Libicki, IW does not exist as a standalone method of waging war; it is instead a collection of different resources one may consider usage of.

The first is ‘command-and-control warfare’, which is defined by the US Department of Defense’s ‘dictionary of military and associated terms’ to be “The exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of the mission” (US DoD 2021, 40).

The second would be ‘intelligence-based warfare’, which as the name suggests, is focused on intelligence acquisition and denial for tactical, operational, and strategic purposes. Third would be ‘electronic warfare’, the use of electromagnetic spectrum-based technologies used against an opponent (e.g., signals intelligence and jamming). Fourth is psychological warfare, the use of information to subvert, intimidate or demoralize the human mind. Fifth would be ‘hacker’ warfare, followed by economic information warfare, and lastly cyberwarfare (Libicki 1995, 10).

Furthermore, IW has different connotations depending on geography; it is understood differently whether one is ‘Western’, Chinese, or Russian. For example, while the above definitions hint at specific military or strategic gains, Russian strategists have viewed it to “erode the boundaries of organized violence” (Gvosdev 2012, 176), which would then result in a form of war without a formal declaration. Russian understanding of IW has also been stated to be defensive: Russia sees Western sources of influence on the internet, and particularly through social media, as an attack on ‘traditional and moral values’, and thus acts defensively in the ‘information space’ (Ajir & Vailliant 2018).

In China, the IW concept can be argued to see use internally, e.g., through digital censorship as a means to control the ‘information economy’, the ideas and thoughts of Chinese citizens (Whyte et al. 2021). This distinction has been argued to be a security threat to the ‘West’, where the lack of understanding of the precise definitions and connotations create an environment where attack vectors are left undefended due to misunderstandings of task and purpose (Vejvodová 2019).

The US Joint Staff definition of information operations, meaning the actual output of one’s information warfare waging is: “the integrated employment, during military operations, of information-related capabilities in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt,

corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential adversaries while protecting our own." (Flyktman et al. in Tikk & Kerttunen 2020, 176).

This should not be confused for strategic communications, which are as the name implies, strategic, whilst information operations are operational; strategic communications are used to reach global audiences, whilst the second has a much more specific focus, both in audience and desired effect (Vejvodová 2019).

Perhaps the best manner to highlight this difference in thought is through the following definition, written by officers of the Russian General Staff: "The goal is for one side to gain and hold an information advantage over the other. This is achieved by exerting a specific information/psychological and information/technical influence on a nation's decision-making system, on the nation's populace and on its information, resource structures, as well as by defeating the enemy's control system and his information resource structures with the help of additional means, such as nuclear assets, weapons, and electronic assets." (Gvosdev 2012, 176).

Additionally, a Russian government document entitled 'Conceptual Views Regarding the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Information Space', mentions that the goal is a societal brainwashing, which is achieved through "damaging information systems, processes, and resources" (Ajir & Vailliant 2018, 72). This damage is not implied to be strictly kinetic: though these processes do include sabotage, clandestine operations, or military deceptions, they also focus on diplomacy, agents of influence and disinformation (Ibid).

These quotes highlight the Russian doctrine of IW, which focuses on the damage of information infrastructure, to both break trust in sources of information, and to force the targeted state to make decisions against their interest (Ibid). In this sense, the Russian understanding is not so different from the American one and fits well within Singer's, the CRS's, and parts of Libicki's definitions.

Where the Russian doctrine begins to differ is with the introduction of 'additional means', or 'non-military means of influence'. The creation and driving of already existing cleavages in targeted societies, which are considered by Russia to be equivalent to the use of weapons of

mass destruction, would mean that "even the use of nuclear weapons might have to be considered" if Russia were to come under 'attack' (Gvosdev 2012, 176).

More importantly, whilst the US definition includes the notion of military operations, the Russian one does not. This will be highlighted through the case studies. Furthermore, the goal of these non-military means of influence are not only to spread falsehoods, but primordially to tarnish national conversations along existing seams, to undermine credibility and to increase tensions (Moy & Gradon 2020).

For example, during the Cold War, the USSR's main security agency, the KGB, made heavy usage of what was then known as 'active measures'. Active measures were a way for the Soviets to shape popular opinion and politics in non-communist countries, through various means ranging from disinformation, demoralization, political meddling, and support of communist political entities abroad (Kux 1985). This form of IW, still in existence and use by modern Russia, is what most of the empirical research and analysis will focus on.

Disinformation, in this sense, is the circulation of what would today be known as 'fake news'; demonstrably false information, or information with a grain of truth but twisted to a particular point of view. Whilst the more apt word would be misinformation in correct English, disinformation has remained in security lexicon, though it is a direct translation of '*dezinformatsiya'* in Russian (Ibid). This concept originally was seen through the 'theory of reflexive control', which is explained as a way of "conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas 2004, 237).

At present, both disinformation and misinformation are used in lexicon, and have evolved into different meanings. This distinction is extremely important in the context of IW, as the concepts have become part of everyday language. The Hewlett Foundation marked this difference extremely well and it has since been adopted by many scholars and experts: while disinformation is purposely false information shared with subversive aims, misinformation is partially false information that is neutral in intent, often shared by parties who believe it to be true (Born & Edgington 2017).

What active measures did through newspapers, politicians, and activist groups, is now achieved under the nomenclature of IW through the same means, with the greatly beneficial addition of the internet, and notably social media.

Moreover, while active measures were an integral part of Soviet subversion strategies, the digitalized world offers capabilities for the same techniques that the Soviets could not have dreamed of. It has been argued that the internet and social media have become the new ‘gold mines’, in the sense that a plethora of user information can be acquired for minimal financial costs, and with a huge potential for ‘weaponization’ (Di Pietro et al. 2021).

Combining this capability with the fact that most users can share articles, news pieces and other forms of content, instantly results in a catastrophic combination; algorithms on social media also serve to separate users into ‘echo chambers’, or social bubbles based in ideology, further driving the power to exploit existing cleavages (Ibid).

Furthermore, social conditions in Western liberal societies, where the negative effects of globalization, coupled with economic downturns and austerity, have created an environment where fundamentalism and radicalism flourishes in the form of religious zealots, ethno-separatists, and political extremists (Webster in Thussu & Freedman 2003).

The perfect example of the power of these technologies is the 2016 US elections, when Russian meddling focused on the acquiring of information through hacking, the social media-based dissemination of information, whether disinformation or misinformation, and a further extremism fermenting campaign targeting specific users based on their political ideology (Flyktman et al. in Tikk & Kerttunen 2020).

This use of social media and the internet was based in two core theoretical aspects of information warfare: “the channel for conveying information operation messages is selected based on the target’s ability to receive messages and not on the ability to transmit. […] propaganda is most effective when it is based on the prejudices of the target audience” (Ibid, 175). As will be demonstrated through empirical research in latter sections, this statement remains valid, in both directions: when the prejudices are lacking, or the ability to receive is diminished, information operations are not as successful.

However, before the advent of social media, this was still achieved through various means. For example, during the first Gulf War, American planes flew over Kuwait, broadcasting messages over radio and television broadcasts, leading to the desertion and surrender of many Iraqi troops, before the fight began (Singer 2001). Yet, during the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1998, poor coordination of IW and the inability to stop Serbian propaganda and disinformation resulted in an unsuccessful effort (Ibid).

In the age of social media, Russia's information warfare capabilities have been bolstered. Though cyber warfare is, as aforementioned, simply a vessel for IW in the Russian sense, information remains the focus (Akimemko & Giles 2020). Thus, whilst cyber is closely linked to information warfare, cyber is simply used to make sure information is received, as the information is weaponized and controlled, but transmitted through cyber capabilities (Ibid). In the Russian doctrine, the two are so interlinked that the notion of cyberspace is not mentioned as it would be in the West, instead the 'information space' comprises all those aspects in one (Ibid).

Russian IW in this sense, is understood to be the new beginning and ending of all conflicts: "Information warfare in the new conditions will be the starting point of every action now called the new type of warfare, or hybrid war, in which broad use will be made of the mass media and, where feasible, global computer networks (blogs, various social networks, and other resources)" (Ibid, 68).

This understanding is also applied on the Russian national level: freedom of information is a source of national turmoil, and a direct threat to national security interests (Ibid). With this logic in mind, the Russian state has tried and tested 'RuNet', an intranet, or disconnected internet, where geographical borders should apply, if disconnecting from the global internet ever became a necessity for state interests (Ibid). Additionally, it should be clear that the use of cyber space for IW permeates into the concept of psychological operations, which will be detailed in the following section.

Another important distinction to make is the difference between propaganda and IW. The easiest way to delineate the two is as follows: IW is used during war, whether cold, hybrid or conventional, as a support tool with a targeted audience, whilst propaganda is a looser, more

general form of influence and ideological shaping that happens on an uninterrupted timeline (Kotelenets & Barabash 2019).

Though there are almost no publicly available Russian documents as to who in the Russian state conducts IW operations, there exist several documents stemming from legal proceedings and open-source investigations which enable an understanding of which specific intelligence bodies are tasked with IW.

For example, through documents released by the US Department of Justice, following the legal proceedings concerning the 2016 US elections' interference, it was discovered that US intelligence agencies identified 'Unit 26165', also known as 'Fancy Bear', the main GRU (Russia's military intelligence service) body for signals intelligence and cryptography (Treyger et al. 2022). This unit focuses on cyberespionage, to obtain documents, in turn released through the guise of misinformation and psychological operations, by publicly releasing potentially misleading or defaming individuals and or organizations (Ibid).

The GRU focused its efforts on psychological operations following the first Chechen war, having learned lessons about the need for adaption to modern equipment and technologies (Ibid). Operational changes around 2014 were noticed by foreign intelligence agencies, who quickly identified 'Unit 54777', considered to be the GRU's main unit for psychological operations (Ibid).

It has been said that the FSB (Russia's federal security service) and the SVR (Russia's external intelligence agency), are both involved in IW, but with fewer resources, leading to frequent recruitment of independent hackers and state-affiliated networks such as the IRA, or Internet Research Agency (Ibid), which will be given more attention below. However, all three agencies are said to compete ruthlessly in the realm of IW, to 'outshine' one another and receive commendation from Russian President Putin (Ibid). Advisors close to Putin are ex-employees of these three agencies, but they are claimed to serve as 'bridges' between Putin and the agencies, to coordinate IW operations (Ibid).

3.2 Psychological Operations

While influencing, disrupting, corrupting, or usurping the decision-making abilities of adversaries is more in line with the Russian doctrine of IW, which is more intensely focused on subversion, the nearest US equivalent are psychological operations. Though psychological operations are a sub-part of IW, they represent a distinct method of using psychology, specifically the "more human-related aspects of abstract information processing" (Ajir & Vailliant 2018, 83).

Whereas IW and cyber warfare can include physical destruction of infrastructure responsible for the dissemination of information, which constitute a 'redline' in deterrence theory (Ibid), psychological operations muddy these waters as there are no 'physical' psychological 'redlines', regardless of the powerful effect that psychological operations may have upon their intended target (Ibid).

As per the US Joint Staff definition, these are information warfare operations specifically targeted at foreign audiences "to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behaviour of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals in a manner favourable to the originator's objectives." (Flyktman et al. in Tikk & Kerttunen 2020, 176).

NATO uses a similar definition: "planned activities using methods of communication and other means directed at approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, affecting the achievement of political and military objectives." (NATO NSO 2014, 1).

Russia has a similar definition which includes 'operations of influence', or active measures, and 'strategic disinformation': "Disinformation of the enemy, the influence exerted on its consciousness, the modelling of interpretation and terminology used in the enemy state is crucial for securing Russian interests. These are tools of creating a favourable atmosphere for the activities of the Russian Federation" (Doroszczyk 2018, 529).

These psychological operations are not mentioned to be exclusive or adjacent to direct conflict. In fact, four specific goals have been identified by researchers: "to facilitate kinetic action, to

support Russian foreign policy narratives, to achieve specific outcomes in other countries, and to exacerbate internal divisions within and between Western states" (Treyger et al. 2022, 58).

To highlight these definitions, an adequate example of a well-known psychological operations campaign is found in the Vietnam war, where the US made heavy use of psychological operations. In the Vietnam war, psychological operations (henceforth psyops) had multiple goals: to discredit the Viet Cong, bolster the South Vietnamese government in the eyes of the public, improve popular thought on US involvement in the country, and finally to influence international thoughts on US activities in Vietnam (Goldstein 1996). The methods used to achieve these goals varied greatly; one of these consisted of encouraging Viet Cong to defect by playing audio messages of other defectors throughout the jungle, or through tracts, radio, and television (Ibid).

This last goal was extremely successful, especially when psyops were used alongside direct military action: 1150 defectors were counted in a two-month period, during which regular battlefield conditions occurred, with psyops support (Ibid), whilst only 211 defections occurred when psyops support was ended (Ibid). However, as per the author of this text, US psyops in Vietnam were doomed from the very beginning, as the image of US soldiers and the US supported government were essentially based on that of the 'foreign invader'; on the other hand, psyops used by the Viet Cong were extremely successful, when capitalizing on terror, intimidation, and patriotic duty to the homeland (Ibid).

When active conflict is not underway, psyops can be used to sow discord, as was the case for active measures. It is noteworthy to mention that active measures are considered offensive psychological operations, in the sense that they exert influence specifically on opponents and are not used on a domestic basis (Doroszczyk 2018).

One example of Soviet era active measures that is still relevant today, is the general idea of forging documents, attributing natural catastrophes or false events to US man-made efforts. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was claimed by KGB affiliated news sources, mainly the Novosti press agency, to be a man-made biological weapon created by the US Army's infectious disease research institute at Fort Detrick (Selvage & Nehring 2019).

Declassified documents from the mid-1980s have demonstrated this, such as letters from the KGB to Bulgarian and East-German intelligence services, where the KGB asked for aid in disseminating this theory to a global audience (Ibid). This conspiracy theory was spread globally, with as many as 30 newspapers worldwide running the story (Goldstein 1996).

This forgery is still in effect today, both amongst online echo chambers, and with Russian state-owned outlet Sputnik still using this conspiracy theory as recently as 2018 (Ibid). Other examples include KGB efforts to invent a US nuclear waste burial site at the Somali-Kenyan border, in exchange for aid programs, whilst neither the burial site nor this aid program ever existed (Goldstein 1996).

Russia is still involved in this sort of practice, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where an IW campaign was launched to heighten fears of side effects in Western vaccines (Gordon & Volz 2021); this campaign will be greatly expanded upon in latter sections.

Amongst forgeries and disinformation campaigns, the Soviets managed to publish pieces reporting on false stories including: ‘ethnic weapons’ that would target only black populations, the involvement of the CIA in Ghandi’s assassination, as well as the assassination of Swedish prime minister Palme, the use of chemical weapons in Honduras, CIA involvement in the ‘Jonestown Massacre’ or even CIA efforts culminating in Sikh ethnic tensions and rebellions in India (Goldstein 1996). Juxtaposed with the latter case studies, it can be argued that modern Russian attempts do not differ in methods, when compared to the Soviet era.

On top of forgeries, agents of influence were used to spread Soviet policy positions inside institutions, such as the United Nations or even in foreign governmental agencies, and amongst the global public (Ibid). These agents were oftentimes unaware of the source of the information they were spreading, as was the case with many journalists in Western Europe. These agents have sometimes been dubbed ‘useful idiots’, individuals fulfilling Russian propaganda goals without understanding them (Ibid).

This is related but not equal to the ongoing practice of ‘elite capture’, where politicians are recruited and maintained as agents of influence. For example, in Germany, many such politicians, including the former chancellor Gerhard Schröder, are in favor of decreasing

sanctions against Russia, and are working directly with the Russian state energy companies, promoting a deepening of a dependency on Russian gas and petrol (Mankoff 2020).

In France, far-right party leader Marine Le Pen has consistently defended the removal of sanctions against Russia, and accepted the Russian annexation of Crimea, all the while Russian banks funded her previous presidential campaigns (Louis 2022). This is a common theme across many of Europe's far-right parties, with the aim being to drive already existing cleavages, manipulating existing emotions for Russian policy efforts. Italy's Berlusconi was very close with Putin, and suspicions of elite capture arose; these same suspicions occurred for Austria's foreign minister, who invited and publicly danced with Putin at her own wedding in 2018 (Weiss 2020).

Some have characterized Russian psyops as using a method called 'the firehose of falsehoods', which has two main aspects: a high number of dissemination sources and published data, and a blatant disregard for truth, oftentimes publishing misinformation as well as pure fiction (Paul & Matthews 2016).

This method serves to not only entertain audiences with incredible stories, but also to confuse them through the sheer amount of information produced (Ibid). This includes both dissemination at the state level through diplomacy and through state-owned news outlets. This is mixed with online trolls on social media who are used to counter views critical of Russian policy (Ibid). This non-linear approach does constitute a hierarchy, but the mix of state actors, state-owned actors, and informal actors, some being foreign nationals who simply share Russia's views, is on purpose: it enables the Kremlin to muddy its own involvement in many IW campaigns and psychological operations (Treyger et al. 2022).

For example, RT or Russia Today, a state-owned media outlet, broadcasts in Russian, English, French, Arabic and German; RT claim to have more than one billion views on their website, making it the most popular news media outlet if this claim is correct (Ibid). Sputnik news, a Soviet era outlet which has rebranded since 2014, has a more impressive linguistical reach of 31 languages (Godzimirski & Østevik 2018).

Sputnik also do not shy away from admitting their true purpose: one news anchor stated that the outlet is for those who are "tired of aggressive propaganda promoting a unipolar world and

who want a different perspective" (Ennis 2014). On top of this, there are numerous Russian or pro-Russian outlets in the form of blogs, social media 'influencers' or videographers who spread pro-Russian statements but mask the origin of their content (Paul & Matthews 2016). The Russian state-owned media outlets received a budget of over $1 billion for 2020-2021, but the budget has increased since (Treyger et al. 2022).

Research done to understand the effectiveness of this method has pointed out that an audience is more likely to believe a conclusion if numerous outlets reach it through different lines of argumentation, that receiving the same information from multiple sources makes it seem more credible, and that a high number of arguments is more valued to a viewer than the actual quality of said arguments (Ennis 2014).

Furthermore, the method of hammering information as fact multiple times will eventually lead to the audience accepting it as fact, simply through repetition (Ibid). However, it should be noted that until now, the literature suggests that 'strongly held beliefs' will not be changed through these campaigns (Cohen et al. 2021). Because of the efficiency of these state-owned and 'masked' outlets, viewers will often read information there first, leading to a sense of credibility and expertise (Paul & Matthews 2016).

The aforementioned 'trolls' are perhaps most infamous through the Internet Research Agency (henceforth IRA). This organization is claimed to have links to Yevgeny Prigozhin, known to have been 'Putin's chef', and more importantly for his private military company 'Wagner Group', who has fought in Syria, Libya, Sub-Saharan Africa, and has been involved in Ukraine since 2014 (Rabin 2019). The IRA is mentioned to staff up to 1000 individuals, who conduct influence operations on social media, with a budget of between $10-12 million yearly (Treyger et al. 2022); though the IRA is infamous, researchers consider the possibility that other organizations of the same sort exist (Ibid).

The IRA was directly involved in social media campaigns during the 2016 US elections, focusing on 'hot' issues involving police brutality, religion, and sexual orientation (Bail et al. 2019). Using the 'firehose of falsehoods' method, the IRA created "more than 57,000 Twitter posts, 2,400 Facebook posts, and 2,600 Instagram posts—and the numbers increased significantly in 2017" (Ibid, 243). The IRA also serves to amplify, or project to further audiences, disinformation and misinformation shared by organic actors in the societies they

target. The IRA spent over $70,000 on Facebook ads alone, to reach new audiences, targeting conservatives and African Americans the most frequently (Treyger et al. 2022).

Other campaigns involved spreading both anti and pro-refugee messages in Germany and France following terrorist attacks in 2016, hoping to elicit emotional responses from both sides (Dawson & Innes 2019). This was also done during the Brexit campaign, pitting both sides against each other using toxic language and imagery (Ibid). These two examples will be expanded upon in latter sections.

On Russia's national level, psyops are believed to be the source of many political protests and demonstrations, orchestrated by cyber capabilities, as Russia believes it is constantly under threat by foreign actors (Akimemko & Giles 2020). An anecdote to highlight this is the inception of the concept of the 'Gerasimov doctrine'.

Understood to be the new Russian manner of waging war, the 'Gerasimov doctrine' turned out to be a mistranslation and misunderstanding, where Gerasimov, the Russian chief of general staff, was in fact describing how to combat what he interpreted to be regime change operations: the Arab Spring (Galeotti 2018). This perception of constant attack explains the idea of isolating the Russian internet and turn it into a national intranet, specifically to avoid first, freedom of information that could be used as part of an IW campaign, and second, to remove the opportunity for psyops.

The internet in this sense is a bastion of national defense, but it is one where Russia is not considered to be a 'great power', as opposed to China or the US: Russia is not able to hold its own in the technological sector, where it is heavily dependent on Western technologies and services (Segal 2016).

For example, the average Western consumer most likely is not aware that Russia produces mobile phones. It would also appear that the Russian 'tech' community has suffered from a brain drain, as most successful and innovative developers move to the US where salaries are much greater (Ibid). Furthermore, smaller states such as Israel and Estonia, are both more advanced that Russia is in the technological sector, which does not seem logical considering Russia's prowess in its offensive cyber capabilities, notably its stealthy and efficient hacker

groups (Ibid). One exception is the Russian communications app ‘Telegram’, which has gathered 700 million users (Telegram 2022).

It can be considered that Russia’s modern day offensive cyber capabilities do greatly contribute to psychological operations: they seek to influence opinions in a way that favors Russian interests, whether this is for subversive purposes or to create the notion of the invincible digital bear. For example, the National Cyber Security Centre of the United Kingdom accuses Russian military intelligence, the GRU, of being ‘almost certainly responsible’ in many cyber-attacks.

These include the US Democratic party email leak in 2016, ransomware and cyber-attacks on Ukraine in 2017, or successful phishing attempts against the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons or OPCW (NCSC 2018). These attacks not only serve to leak information, but also to gain access to protected data, as well as to establish Russia as a powerful actor, which does influence perceptions and behavior.

3.3 Revisionism

The concept of revisionism is crucial in making sense of Russia's foreign policy and geopolitical goals since the end of the Soviet Union. In the simplest sense, revisionist states are those who wish to change the status-quo in international relations (Davidson 2002). To do this, revisionist states adopt a stance which challenges accepted norms and rules of the international order, by going against international laws (Allison 2020).

Revisionism thus implies a willingness to change the rules as established or accepted under the liberal order, which shapes the international balance of power and its distribution (Karmazin & Hynek 2020). However, while all states may challenge some segments of the international order at any given point, not all can be considered as revisionist states (Behravesh 2018), as this status includes some conditions which shall be expanded upon below.

Adjacent concepts include first, foreign policy revisionism, which is of relevance to this project: "policies and diplomatic practices by which state leaders either symbolically or materially privilege the interests of the in-group on the international stage" (Jenne 2021, 325). Second, historical revisionism is "[t]he ability to revise and update historical narrative" (Krasner 2020, 15). Though a necessary process of the study of history, historical revisionism has often been used as a tool for revisionist states who wish to re-draw borders or create new nationalist myths (Ibid).

The idea of revisionism has its roots in fascist Italy, in 1938, when Mussolini embarked on a crusade to revise Italy's regional power status, by seizing territory including the Suez Canal, Gibraltar, Tunisia, Cyprus and Malta (Davidson 2002). This would allow Mussolini to regain legitimacy on a domestic level, through historical revisionist narratives, as well as alleviating concerns about the autonomous capabilities of the Italian regime (Ibid).

To credibly accuse a state of having revisionist ambitions, there are certain criteria which need to be met. Mainly, the ambition to change the status-quo must be clearly delineated by the state, who marks those revisionist goals as key policy goals, and with acceptance of the potential consequences that accompany those goals (Ibid). Simply stating that a state has revisionist goals is insufficient if said state does not provide credible evidence that it will achieve its preferences in changing the status-quo (Ibid).

Furthermore, it is argued that states considered to be ‘rising’, or emerging powers, are much more inclined to adopt revisionist goals than ‘stagnant’ states (Ibid). Whilst this does not mean all emerging powers will embrace revisionist policy, it can be safely assumed that a state outgrowing its neighbor at a rapid economic or technological pace will be more inclined to embark on revisionist expeditions (Ibid). In the Russian context, Russia was once considered to be an emerging power, implying that the Russian government aspired to challenge the hegemonic status of the US, and wanted to become a greater power both regionally and internationally (MacFarlane 2006).

Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia suffered heavily from economic downturn, primarily due to poor measures of transition into privatization (Ibid). As a result, unemployment was rife and the Russian currency collapsed, leading to a slow recovery and resurgence which came about through petrol and natural gas sales (Ibid). During this post-Soviet recovery, Russia’s international status briefly disappeared, but when the Bear resurfaced, NATO was now on its borders, and the US was the only superpower (Ibid).

Additionally, Russian security concerns about these expansions, both in the Baltics and in central Asia, where the US now had treaty allies and bases, were ignored (Ibid). McFarlane argues that this period of downturn in Russia’s history can be considered equivalent to China’s ‘century of humiliation’ (Ibid). Russia was also proposed a seat at the European Union’s table, but one where they would not be able to participate in any shaping of rules and development (Lukyanov 2016).

The first sign of Russian revisionism following the end of the Soviet Union was the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (Koshkin 2019). Russia vocally expressed its reservations about Western plans for the region, expressing its point of view in what was explained as a “manifestation of a self-sufficient and independent foreign policy” (Ibid).

The costs incurred for this revisionism were heavy: Russia cancelled US approval to restructure its debt and obtain a $5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, as well as signing numerous trade and cooperation deals, a move estimated to have cost Russia $15 billion in economic growth, but one where revisionist principles came before financial incentive (Ibid).

The Russian prime minister at the time, Yevgeny Primakov, expressed clear intent to challenge the US hegemony, which according to him was not working, and to instead focus on multipolarity (Ibid). This idea was repeated by Putin in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference, and this speech has been argued to be the start of the 'new cold war' (Ibid).

However, whilst the signs were only clearly enunciated in 1999, one ideologue can be pinpointed as the source of modern Russian revisionism. Aleksandr Dugin was born in 1962, to a father who worked for the GRU, Russia's military intelligence. (Clover 2016a). What Dugin senior did within the GRU is unknown, but his existence is important, as it has been argued that Aleksandr's antics in his life as a young man would not have been possible, had it not been for a high ranking official in the family (Ibid).

Aleksandr was on numerous occasions arrested by the KGB, the infamous USSR's main security agency, but his father's position "allowed his son to regularly violate the orthodoxies of Soviet life and get away with it" (Ibid, 156). Dugin was a prominent non-conformist, who sang songs under the stage-name "Hans Sievers", inspired by "Wolfram Sievers, […] the Reichsgeschäftsführer, or director, of the Ahnenerbe, a Nazi organization set up by Heinrich Himmler to study esoteric and paranormal phenomena" (Ibid, 158).

In 1987, Dugin joined an illegal political movement called Pamyat, best described as "a crypto-fascist street gang – an agglomeration of football hooligans and middle- class aesthetes" (Ibid, 162). Soviet archives later revealed that the KGB aimed to infiltrate and 'balkanize' Pamyat, but control was lost rapidly (Ibid). One hypothesis is that the KGB could see the first signs of the Soviet dissolution, and therefore clung onto the largest nationalist movement, in awe at the ability of Pamyat to organize not only the movement, but the masses (Ibid).

In 1990, following much enthusiasm from several KGB members, Dugin was invited by the central committee of the communist party of the Soviet Union, to write in a new journal named 'Continent Russia' (Ibid). This was part of a series of attempts at ideological renewal, pushing for alternative ways of governing than the clearly failing Soviet attempt. Gaining additional fame through this journal, Dugin met Alexander Prokhanov. (Ibid)

Prokhanov, had just been tasked with directing a new journal, called 'The Day' (Ibid). There, Dugin published many conspiracy theories, hypothesizing on the end of the USSR, which could

not have possibly happened on its own, and therefore there must have some external hand involved (Ibid). More importantly, Prokhanov eventually introduced Dugin to General Rodionov, who invited Dugin as a guest speaker for the academy of the General Staff (Ibid). Thus, through strokes of luck and acquaintances, a former ethno-fascist who had until then published conspiracy-theory loaded ramblings, was now part of the body responsible for the training of officers.

In 1997, Aleksandr Dugin published his book "*Foundations of Geopolitics*", which sold out in four different editions, and became an assigned reading at the academy of the General Staff (Clover 2016b). This journey to becoming an instructor and publishing this book are extremely relevant to contemporary Russian strategy, as the 1997 literary work highlighted the necessity of events including: reclaiming Georgia and Ukraine, which would both serve to dominate the Black Sea, politically separating the UK from mainland Europe, and sowing divisions amongst religious and ethnic lines in the US (Nelson 2020b).

The book also seeks to promote a Eurasian empire, built along the lines of 'Moscow as the third Rome', a civilizational beacon for all ethnic Russian and Russian speakers, tied through the Orthodox religion, ethnicity, and culture (Ibid). This is necessary to fight for humanity's survival according to Dugin, which he sees as being assaulted by liberal and 'Atlanticist' values (Ibid).

Other geopolitical necessities are the importance of Germany and France in Russia's foreign affairs towards the West because both have a weary view of the Anglo-Saxon dynamics in NATO (Dunlop 2004). Furthermore, the integration of Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Belarus, and Finland into Russian territory are mentioned to be of importance in the creation of this new European-Eurasian order (Ibid).

Most interestingly, and particularly important at present, is the insistence that Russia should utilize gas and petrol exports to achieve goals, "to pressure and bully other countries into bending to Russia's will" (Ibid, n.p.). This has happened recently when Moscow threatened to close the gas taps to Europe if payments were not made in rubles, the Russian currency (Cole 2022).

Furthermore, Russia has been said to have launched information warfare (henceforth IW) campaigns in the past to prevent European energy security from materializing, by sponsoring anti-fracking and anti-nuclear organizations, a claim repeated by Devin Nunes, the former chairman of the US House Intelligence Committee (Waldman 2019).

Suffice to say, considering recent events surrounding the topics in his book, the works of Dugin have been extremely influential amongst high-ranking cadre of the Russian government. It has been mentioned that “there probably has not been another book published in Russia during the post-communist period that has exerted an influence on Russian military, police, and statist foreign policy elites comparable to that of Aleksandr Dugin's 1997 neo-fascist treatise” (Ibid 2004).

Thus, with the origins of modern-day Russian revisionism in mind, establishing Russia as a revisionist state according to appropriate criteria is straight forward. However, there are many forms of actors within the international order: first, status-quo actors include states which benefit from the international order and its power distribution. Second, reformist actors are mostly benefiting from international power distribution, but which to change it on more regional and local lines. Third, positionalist actors wish to change the distribution of power, but are satisfied by the rules and norms of the international order. (Cooley et al. 2019).

The fourth form of actors within the international order are revisionist states. A rising power transitions to a revisionist state when it threatens the international order, by force, wearing away at established norms and rules (Pisciotta 2019). There are different typologies of revisionist states, the first important one being nationalist revisionism, which is a regional status-quo change involving military means for territorial expansion, as was the case with the Russian invasion of Georgia and annexation of Crimea (Ibid).

The second important typology is radical revisionism, which aims to challenge norms of the status-quo but doing so within the framework of the international order; the example given by the author is Russia’s involvement in Syria to support the incumbent dictator Bashar al-Assad (Ibid).

Third, revolutionary revisionism aims to completely rewrite the rules as well as the hierarchy of the international order; the example given by the author is Nazi Germany, on the grounds of

the clear ideological aims of Nazi foreign policy (Ibid). These revolutionary revisionist actors also wish to revise the distribution of capabilities as well (Cooley et al. 2018). It can thus be argued, to provide a more modern example, that Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, which has clear ideological aims as well as territorial ones, and goals focused on changing the balance of power both regionally against NATO and internationally in a game of prestige and power, is an act of revolutionary revisionism.

Additionally, Russia may be classified as a 'guerrilla revisionist', which focuses primordially on its regional influence, the near abroad, or post-Soviet states (Karmazin & Hynek 2020). This is done using historical revisionism to create the image of the 'Russian civilization', which couples Russia's desired sphere of influence in its 'neighborhood', and the perception of an 'anti-Russian' West (Ibid). This then leads to a challenge of the US-hegemonic world order, as well as its Western counterparts (Ibid).

In 2005, Putin claimed that the dissolution of the USSR was a geopolitical catastrophe, not in the sense of admiration towards the USSR, but rather in terms of lost power and prestige for Russia (Pisciotta 2019). In 2007, Putin declared his intent to challenge the status-quo of international politics – the US hegemony, which he classified as an impossible tenure due to its 'overstepping' whether in cultural, economic, political or educational factors (Koshkin 2019).

This watershed moment can be classified as the 'start' of the new Cold war (Sakwa 2008; Koshkin 2019). These two dates alone are a clear, overt mention of revisionist policy, which became main policy goals, as observed through the lens of international events including but not limited to: the invasion of Georgia, the intervention in Syria, the invasion of Crimea and the Donbas, and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Furthermore, the ongoing war in Ukraine has been mentioned to be a new source of revival for Dugin's ideas and Russian revisionism. For example, since late March of 2022, a new bill in the Russian parliament has been undergoing preliminary consideration. This bill proposes the consideration of all ethnic Russians and native Russian language speakers as 'compatriots' (Antelava 2022). This rationale was used in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, where 'compatriots' were given Russian nationality, leading to Moscow's meddling to 'protect' its people, and has arguably been extremely relevant in the rhetoric of ongoing the ongoing

invasion of Ukraine (Ibid). It is also the rhetoric as aforementioned through 'guerilla revisionism', which makes extensive use of historical revisionism.

Dugin has long approached the future of Russia as a union of the 'Russian civilization' and has regarded Putin as a god sent individual meant to rekindle a Slavic empire (Ibid). These ideas are echoed through ongoing events and rationale for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, implying that even if Putin does not read Dugin's works himself, the ideas are shared widely through Russian politics, and through the ideologies of the so-called independent republics in the Eastern regions of Ukraine (Ibid). As explained by Nelson: "regardless of his direct influence on Putin, Aleksandr Dugin's geopolitical stratagems have come to fruition for 23 years straight. If he is not a man Putin follows directly, he is still a man the West should observe with a watchful eye" (Nelson 2020b).

4. Case Studies: Russian Information Warfare aimed at 'the West' Before the Invasion of Ukraine

Following this theoretical discussion above, it is time to delve into the case studies. There are many examples of Russian IW campaigns targeting the West, many of them going as far back as the 1930s, for example when the Soviets, through control of internal information by censors in journalism, successfully hid the events of the Holodomor in an act so efficient that some still deny this artificial famine which killed almost 4 million Ukrainians (Applebaum 2017).

Many of these campaigns have been extensively studied in academia, such as the 2016 election interference by Russia in the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Others did not receive the same level of attention, which can be because they are extremely recent, and therefore the following case studies have been selected.

4.1 COVID-19 Related Information Warfare Campaigns

The HIV/AIDS conspiracies spawned by the Soviet KGB was not a single event, but unfortunately an episode in a series of medical related conspiracies. For over two years, the world has been enduring a pandemic, COVID-19, which has gradually slowed and is hopefully on its way out due to vaccinations and a more complete understanding of this novel virus.

However, skepticism of the existence of the disease itself, its severity and then the vaccinations have been rampant throughout societies across the globe. Whilst it is not intellectually honest to attribute these feelings to a Russian information warfare campaign alone, it is demonstrable that Russian intelligence agencies have efficiently exploited conspiracy thinking in this domain.

According to 'EUvsDisinfo', the main project of the European Union's ESCTF (East Strategic Communications Task Force, itself a body of the European External Action Service or EEAS), which is tasked with countering Russian IW campaigns, the first piece of COVID-19 related misinformation was released in January 2020. This Russian language piece published by state owned outlet Sputnik, claimed that COVID-19 is a virus created in NATO laboratories, as a form of biological weapons' testing gone wrong (EUvsDisinfo 2021e).

This was repeated by the 'Moskovskij Komsomolets', where it was said that COVID-19 is a specifically American biological weapon, using the idea that there is an American consulate in Wuhan, where the virus originates, as a correlation between the two (EUvsDisinfo 2020a). It must be noted that 'Moskovskij Komsomolets' is owned by a Pavel Gusev, who is under EU sanctions aimed towards "high-ranking Kremlin officials, oligarchs" (TASS 2022a), and is close to Putin, seeing as he was one of his media 'confidants' in 2018 (Polit 2018). Both stories were run in Russian only, for domestic consumption. More importantly, this conspiracy theory was also pushed by TVZvezda, a state news outlet run by the Russian ministry of defense (EUvsDisinfo 2020c)

In February 2020, Russian disinformation efforts were aimed at the Arabic speaking world, notably through 'Katehon', a far-right Russian think tank, where none other than Aleksandr Dugin is a contributing author (Nelson 2020a). The owner of 'Katehon', Konstantin Malofeev, is a Russian businessman with ties to Putin, who has connections with many of Europe's far-right parties including the French 'Rassemblement National', or the Austrian 'FPÖ', as well as some of Europe's far-left parties (Salhani 2017).

Malofeev has also been identified by Ukrainian intelligence services as a financer of separatist movements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine in 2014 (Ibid). This disinformation claim from February 2020 claimed that COVID-19 is an officially patented biological experiment (EUvsDisinfo 2020b). One month later, disinformation spread in Polish claimed that a NATO exercises and the arrival of US troops was responsible for COVID-19 in Poland (Moy & Gradon 2020).

As per EUvsDisinfo, one web-based outlet has been very influential in spreading COVID-19 related conspiracies, a neo-Eurasian website, inspired by the philosophy of Dugin, which portrays Russia as 'the eternal Rome', the savior of a declining and rotten West (EUvsDisinfo 2021a). This website is 'Geopolitika.ru', which publishes 'news' with a focus on Russian centric views, highlighting perceived decay in the West, and does so in English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Turkish, Arabic and Urdu, as well as Russian.

Amongst its COVID-19 related conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation, the website caters to believers of the populist theory of 'globalists' attempting to seize control of the world, to establish the 'new world order' (Ibid). Though it is admittedly difficult to establish

just how popular this website is in the countries for which languages are offered, it can be observed that its forums are filled with users from the targeted audience countries, and as such may serve as a rendezvous for fringe communities (Ibid).

Another influential web-based outlet is 'NewsFront'. NewsFront was created in 2014, during the annexation of Crimea; pro-Russian separatists stormed the Crimean Center for Investigative Journalism and told the journalists that they could remain working there if they stopped their "provocations" regarding the situation in Crimea (Shuster 2021). None of the journalists accepted, and NewsFront was established in its place by Konstantin Knyrik, who before this headed the 'Eurasian Youth Union', a movement set up by Aleksandr Dugin, who Knyrik met at an ultranationalist 'summer camp' (Rossbach 2018). It is worthy to mention that this summer camp was also where many of the influential separatists from Donetsk met (Ibid).

Knyrik openly speaks of his job as the editor in chief of NewsFront as being part of an information war: "Information war was declared against Russia. It was not Russia who initiated the war." (Ibid, n.p.). With around 100 staff members, NewsFront publishes stories in 10 languages, such as falsehoods about migrant riots in Germany, which never occurred (Ibid). During the early months of the pandemic, NewsFront received almost 500 million views, and had 500,000 subscribers on YouTube in total by April 2020; the content suggested that Bill Gates and George Soros were behind the COVID-19 virus, and that microchips would be in the vaccines (Shuster 2021).

Due to the reach of this outlet, both YouTube and Facebook blocked all NewsFront and associated accounts (Ibid). Though Knyrik denies receiving any support from Russian intelligence agencies, he does appear to have indirect links to Putin, through various political contacts (Rossbach 2018). The success of this small, previously unheard-of outlet, as well as its imbedding with Russian soldiers on operations in Eastern Ukraine and in Syria, suggests a closer relationship than what Knyrik is saying (Ibid). The US department of the treasury has since 2021 applied sanctions against NewsFront, mentioning it to be run by the Russian FSB, the main Russian security agency (USDT 2021).

One interesting aspect of the Russian IW campaign in the realm of COVID-19, is that it has had dramatic effect on domestic thought. Whilst some have noted the differences in Russia Today's thoughts on masks, where it encouraged Western viewers to 'ditch' them, whilst

telling its Russian viewers to use them whenever possible (EUvsDisinfo 2021a), it may have come as a surprise to Russian medical authorities that vaccine skepticism became so prevalent amongst domestic audiences. EUvsDisinfo registered over 1000 attempts by Russian-owned media to spread pandemic disinformation, and notes that the Russian state has heavily downplayed the impact of the virus on the Russian population (EUvsDisinfo 2021c).

The rise of vaccine skepticism, particularly aimed at Western vaccines, mainly the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine which relies on 'mRna' technology, mixed with disinformation about COVID-19 related deaths to Russian domestic audiences, has led to a situation where the Russian vaccine Sputnik V has been rejected by many (EUvsDisinfo 2021b). For example, RIA Novosti, a state-owned Russian media outlet, has published various stories promoting Sputnik V, whilst accusing Pfizer/BioNTech of responsibility in the supposed deaths of 29 people inoculated with their vaccine (Ibid).

The Spanish edition of Russia Today also played a prolific role in popularizing Sputnik V amongst audiences in Spain, even though the vaccine is not approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), as well as audiences in Latin America, where Sputnik V is portrayed as a 'humanitarian vaccine', fighting against 'big pharma' in the West (EUvsDisinfo 2020d). When a letter was published in medical journal 'The Lancet', criticizing Sputnik V and its seemingly stellar results, the Russian response, through Russia Today and government officials, was to accuse of a 'corporate Cold War' and 'medical Russophobia' (Lucas et al. 2022).

The Polish Institute for International Affairs identified a pattern, describing how Russian IW efforts towards COVID-19 stemmed from prior campaigns, focusing on the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan crisis, the 2016 US elections and the 2018 French Yellow Vests protests (Moy & Gradon 2020). In the US, it was recognized that the IW campaign surrounding the virus was successfully weaponized as it played on well-known societal cleavages. For example, Russian misinformation successfully recognized that Black Americans were dying from COVID-19 at much higher rates than other groups in the US, primarily due to socio-economic conditions, population dense environments, and poor access to healthcare (Ibid).

However, misinformation pieces ignored those real factors, and tried to inflame race-relations. It has been reported in one survey that exposure to but one theme of disinformation alone,

whether it involved virus skepticism, vaccine hesitancy or lockdown-related themes, led to a 40% decrease in vaccination uptake (Neely et al. 2021). One issue with attribution of disinformation or misinformation to Russian IW campaigns, is the scale of politicization around the pandemic, both in the US and Europe, where local sources of disinformation and misinformation arose on their own.

On top of state-owned media outlets and independent forums or think tanks, Russian IW efforts surrounding the virus were attempted by fake companies, to recruit agents of influence. This was particularly true in France, where multiple YouTube personalities were contacted by a company called ‘Fazze’, claiming to stem from London (Dalton 2021).

Fazze offered the owners of the YouTube channels financial incentives to publish videos spreading disinformation about deaths following injections with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, claiming for example that this vaccine was three times deadlier than AstraZeneca’s vaccine (Ibid). One channel contacted to do this, Léo Grasset’s ‘Dirty Biology’, with over 1 million subscribers, refused and instead posted the appeal on Twitter, demonstrating how Fazze wanted him to push this story on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok (Campbell 2021).

After some open-source investigation by fellow Twitter users, it was understood that Fazze was never listed as a company in the UK, but that it was linked to a marketing agency called ‘AdNow’, based in Moscow (Dalton 2021). It can be assumed that French audiences were targeted, due to already present widespread vaccine hesitancy at the time. Furthermore, Fazze wanted Grasset to push a narrative that the mainstream media is ignoring concerns about Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines, seeking to diminish legitimacy in not only French but also European Union institutions.

The same occurred in Germany, where Mirko Drotschmann, a popular YouTuber with 1.5 million subscribers, who is also an ex-presenter for television channel ZDF (Haynes & Carmichael 2021), received similar requests from Fazze. Drotschmann received instructions to link and refer to a leaked document from the EMA; though the leaked document is real, it makes no mentions of deaths, however the association to a legitimate document would trick users into believing it (Ibid).

A German journalist, Daniel Laufer, investigated to identify social media stars who may have taken the opportunity offered by Fazze. A YouTuber in India and another in Brazil were found to have shared messages extremely similar to those as instructed by Fazze, referring to the leaked document, and the three times deadlier spiel (Ibid). Upon requests for interviews by Laufer, both YouTubers deleted their videos and did not engage in communications (Ibid).

Whilst Fazze was never registered in the UK and appeared to be an IW's equivalent to a shell-company, the fake company did give the same address as AdNow (Krutov et al. 2021). AdNow also officially referenced Fazze as a 'subsidiary', and most employees of Fazze on Linkedin were Russian nationals, with education backgrounds in Russia (Dalton 2021).

Though AdNow is owned by a fairly unknown Russian businessman named Stanislav Fesenko, up until 2018, it was owned by Yulia Serebryanskaya (Krutov et al. 2021). Serebryanskaya is particularly relevant, as she is extremely close to Putin, and took part in political campaigns for Putin's party 'United Russia' (Ibid). The ties between Fazze's disinformation campaign and Serebyanskaya remain murky, but the loose pieces of evidence do point, at the least, towards individuals who have far reaching connections within the Kremlin.

One example that shows a high level of connections between the Kremlin and these IW campaigns is the case of 'InfoRos'. This story begins with a French-language based website called 'Observateurcontinental', which was running 'news' stories including NATO being to blame for COVID-19 outbreaks in Europe, attempting to create links between NATO exercises and the date of outbreaks. Other studies involve the repetition of a claim by law professor Francis Boyle that the virus is a biological weapon that leaked out of a US military laboratory. Another story implied that the virus was used as an excuse to arrest and silence political opponents in Germany (EU DisinfoLab 2020).

The website is self-described as an independent French entity, with no openly mentioned connections to any other media institutions. However, technical data shows that the website is registered to a domain in Germany, but the company behind this domain is itself registered as a 'technical contact', owned by one Alex Kouchnir, openly listed as residing in Moscow, and with an email address ending in an '@inforos.ru' domain (Ibid).

Furthermore, the source code of the supposedly French website shares distinctive coding found in 243 other websites; though this number may seem high, all of them are in Russia and in Russian, which is quite the coincidence (Ibid). Most of these websites are also openly listed as belonging to InfoRos (Ibid). An additional clue is that error messages on the website, which is normally entirely in French, appear in Russian (Ibid).

There are more blunders regarding the identity of the website's owners, including some interviews where InfoRos is listed as the interviewer, but referred to as 'us' on the supposedly independent French website (Ibid). These interviews can be found published on InfoRos websites in Russian on prior dates (Ibid).

Interestingly, there are openly available links between InfoRos and the Kremlin, as contracts have been awarded to the media organization to e.g., conduct domestic opinion polls, operate websites promoting Russian foreign policy goals, or organizing a conference on information and cyber security in Germany, the last two at the behest of the Russian ministry of foreign affairs (Ibid).

Finally, US intelligence officials were anonymously cited in the Washington Post, stating that InfoRos is in fact a GRU 'front operation', operated by a unit known as '54777', described as "the center of the Russian military's psychological-warfare capability" (Ibid, 26). InfoRos was namely also involved in publishing articles demanding Russia 'liberate' ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine as early as 2014 (Ibid).

A noteworthy comment about the methods used by 'Observateurcontinental' is the role of advertising on social media platforms, particularly on Facebook. Though it is impossible to see the selected targeted audience, the funds spent, or the total views gathered through advertisements, it does highlight a common tactic used during Russian IW campaigns on social media (Ibid).

The stated goal of this tactic is not to gather views, but instead to establish a network of 'proxy websites' to use in conjunction with the firehose of falsehoods, to repeat disinformation and misinformation through multiple outlets, which has been shown to create trust in viewers (Ibid). This can imply two things: that it is a long-term plan aiming to increase the outflow of

information and viewership in the future, or that it aims for the information to be ‘picked up’ by other outlets.

This second option has materialized in the past, even transcending linguistical borders. For example, one successful story concerning NATO’s role in COVID-19 spreading in Europe, published by ‘Observateurcontinental’ was copy pasted by various bloggers in France, but then made their way to Czech, Slovak and Italian websites (Ibid). It is demonstrable through available numbers in this case, that the copy-pasted versions by bloggers did gather many more views than the original source did (Ibid).

4.1.1 Discussion

It is incredibly difficult to obtain reliable information about the exact effects of these IW campaigns orchestrated by Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some clues can be found. For example, according to Czech member Bob Kartous of the “Elves”, a grassroots movement originating in Lithuania aimed at combatting Russian “trolls” (Lucas et al. 2022), it can be assumed that the Czech Republic is a good starting point.

Kartous, fighting against disinformation stemming from unknown sources during the pandemic, makes the argument that the Czech Republic’s domestic opinions on lockdowns, where the anti-lockdown sentiment was widespread, is due to exposure to disinformation; this anti-lockdown sentiment was not shared as widely in Portugal or Denmark, both countries having implemented similar measures, primarily due to less disinformation, and the ability of Danish and Portuguese citizens to filter disinformation more effectively (Lazarová 2022). However, this point ignores other societal factors rooted in history, and is somewhat derogatory towards the intellect of the overall Czech population. Perhaps a better argument can be made regarding historical societal traumas when it comes to perceived overarching governmental control.

Some quantitative studies have been made, focusing on large datasets of English language published news articles, using LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation), a model which allows for identification of key words and topics within each individual article. The preliminary result of such an LDA model targeting over 240,000 articles, 14,000 of them being from Russian state media sources, suggests that whilst most news media focused on the pandemic itself, Russian state media sources went out of their way to discuss certain ‘fear-inducing’ topics (Johnson & Marcellino 2021).

For example, Russian state media focused on the potential privacy issues of contact tracing, sometimes supported the idea that COVID-19 is simply non-existent, that its health hazard is greatly over-estimated, or bolstered the idea that the pandemic was used as a pretext to establish a tyrannical government (Ibid). Russian state media also heavily focused on publications targeting the vaccine trials (Ibid). According to the analysis from this same study, this greatly differs with the information operations performed by China, which primordially focused on

casting doubts about the Wuhan hypothesis, in an attempt to shift blame about the virus' origin (Ibid).

As highlighted above, the extent of Russian information warfare operations regarding COVID-19 are extensive. Through a multi-prong approach, making use of state media, think tanks, social media, so-called 'affiliated websites' or proxy websites, agents of influence, the so-called 'firehose of falsehoods' method has been used to create a constant stream of disinformation and misinformation regarding the pandemic. The goal of this attempt is clear: it is to sow discord and distrust in Western societies, with the added benefit being the collateral damage caused by vaccine hesitancy, virus skepticism and what can best be described as ideological separatism.

Whilst native Western sources managed to politicize the virus and inflame the discussion surrounding not only the pandemic, but also government responses, it is clear that the Russian attempts have been successful in their goals. Though precise data will likely never be established as to the exact outcomes of Russian information warfare in this case, it is abundantly explicit that the tactic of exploiting existing emotions, particularly fear and anger, is a useful tool when seeking to cause harm.

The literature on this topic is clear: exposure to disinformation and misinformation, whether from Russian origins or not, have a quantifiable effect on vaccine uptakes and beliefs in conspiracy theories, which arguably influence mortality rates. Therefore, it can be assumed solely through the popularity of some social media channels, and the rates of Russian state media viewership, that the Russian information warfare campaigns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have had a direct effect on health risks and deaths in the West.

Focusing on societal fears, cleavages and conspiracy theories does seem to be, in this context, a particularly effective way to perhaps irrevocably damage trust in institutions, such as the EU, the so-called 'mainstream media', and medical agencies or pharmaceutical companies, and as a result entire societies, on top of the health risks posed by such reckless and opportunistic IW campaigns. This is highlighted by the Russian population's own fears and hesitancy regarding the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine.

4.2 Migration Related Information Warfare Campaigns

Russia has engaged in multiple IW operations regarding migration over the last decade. This case study will focus on the 2015 European migrant crisis, and the 2021 Belarus migrant crisis. These two have been chosen because they share many similarities in goals and tactics, as different as the respective contexts may be. It is also a reality that academia has not produced much literature on the more recent example, most likely because it is an ongoing crisis. However, both are valid examples to highlight a systematic Russian attempt to use IW to sow discord in the affected communities.

The 2015 migrant crisis was a challenging situation for the EU. It is commonly agreed upon that the crisis began in March 2015, after four years of war in Syria, where displaced Syrians who fled to neighboring Jordan and Lebanon decided to move to Europe, in search of better living conditions (Parkes & Pauwels 2017).

In some respects, the EU is partially to blame for the situation: funding to United Nations and the World Food Programme, amongst other intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions, meant to be arriving from the EU, never came (Ibid). On top of this, the Syrian refugees in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and Lebanon, were frustrated at the lack of employment, schooling and overall ability to live in legality (OECD 2015).

Furthermore, the long-lasting war in Afghanistan, the rise of the Islamic State, conflicts in Africa, and the further deterioration of Iraq lead to enhanced migratory flows (Parkes & Pauwels 2017). Amidst this situation of despair, criminal gangs saw opportunities to capitalize on the crisis by becoming human smugglers, promising passage to the EU in exchange for cash (Ibid).

Many are also coming from Pakistan and various African countries, from Eritrea to Libya and Nigeria amongst others, where human security is quite poor; others take the opportunity to leave conditions of high rates of unemployment and poverty, as was the case with Albanian Kosovars for example (OECD 2015). This difficult situation led the EU member states to react very differently: while Germany registers over 1 million asylum applications, other states including Hungary or Croatia, built fences to keep people out (Parkes & Pauwels 2017).

Naturally, this exceptional situation of mass human movement, the largest since the Second World War (OECD 2015), creates fears, empathy but also anger. While some are happy to accept their new refugee neighbors, others see an invasion by economic migrants, and many remark on the fact that on many migrant routes, such as the Mediterranean crossings, 80% of arrivals are adult men, and not women and children (Ibid). This led to a situation of heightened populism, the rise of many far-right parties, and increasingly polarized societies, both at the state and the EU level.

Furthermore, the cleavage in approach to the crisis at the member state level, meant that while some countries encouraged solidarity and wanted a 'fair burden' approach to relocate migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to alleviate the countries most affected by newcomers, others focused on securitization, which in broad terms, as per Ole Waever's theory, is the act of making a political issue a security problem (Balzacq et al. 2016). This perfect storm was a great opportunity for Russia to capitalize on.

The goals Russia wanted from this can be explained in multiple ways. First, Moscow wanted to 'reenter' the European political landscape, from which it had been excluded following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and support of separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine (Braghiroli & Makarychev 2017). Second, it gave the Kremlin the opportunity to redefine European politics along a more conservative and traditional view, playing on the idea of Moscow as 'the eternal Rome', saving the decadent West from overly intrusive political correctness and its failing liberal tolerance (Ibid). Third, the anti-immigration far right parties that would gain support from this crisis, were in 2015 very pro-Russian, and in favor of removing sanctions in place due to the situation in Ukraine (Cernea & Nyquist 2018).

During this crisis, perceptions of the EU, both internal and external, changed on two main axes: first, that the EU member states lost in legitimacy as strong international actors, due to their inability to control their own borders, and second, that the growing rifts between member states made the EU weaker (Veebel 2020). Additionally, the crisis revealed many structural and organizational weaknesses of the EU, with its poor attempts to move funds where they were needed, and due to member states having to pay for many of the newly arrived, oftentimes exorbitant amounts for integration and social aid (Ibid).

It is also noteworthy that while Russia viewed this crisis as a golden opportunity to conduct IW operations to further damage relationships and cohesion, many point to Russia as an origin of the problem. In fact, even the Commander of the United States European Command and Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, General Breedlove, publicly stated in 2016 that Russia 'weaponized' migration as a hybrid threat through its war in Syria, by purposely bombing civilian centers, to "terrorize the public and get them on the road […], make them someone else's problem. […] make them a problem for Europe to bend Europe to the will of where they want them to be." (Schoemaker 2019, 362). The Czech minister of defense in 2015, Martin Stropnicky, also suggested that Russia was hoping for terrorists to enter EU territories alongside refugees, to then arm them (Nyquist & Cernea 2018).

In terms of exploiting the crisis, Russia led an IW campaign based on three narratives, which target three different segments of the EU and its population. These three narratives focus on first, the 'guilt narrative', which aims to portray the West as the sole responsible entity for the crisis, through Western support of various armed groups in Syria and Iraq (Nestoras 2019). Second, the 'threat narrative' claims that the EU's approach to the migrant crisis led to a security catastrophe, where the member states are unable to protect their citizens in the face of an 'invasion' and an 'Islamization' by foreigners (Ibid). Third, the 'security narrative' portrays Russia as the only possible option for European salvation, through anti-terrorism efforts, immigration policies, and promotion of traditional and 'Christian' values (Ibid).

The guilt narrative has different facets. As aforementioned, it blames the West for its geopolitical goals in the Middle East, and the effect of those goals on the migrant crisis. To do so, Russian state media Russia Today interviewed Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, where he personally stated, "If you are worried about refugees […] Stop supporting terrorists" (Ibid, 5). This content of this interview was relayed in most international newspapers, where al-Assad's statements were viewed many times.

Coupled with this were accusations by other state-owned media broadcasters that the US is responsible for the creation of both al-Qaeda and ISIS, which were said to be playing into US regional interests, specifically to facilitate a gas pipeline through Syria (Ibid). Furthermore, conspiracy theories about the migrant crisis being a scheme by the EU and the US to eradicate European civilization, which of course only Russia could save (Ibid).

One common strategy making use of the guilt narrative was, and remains, to falsely associate the 'white helmets', a Syrian volunteer group helping civilians in war zones, as working alongside al-Qaeda (Townsend 2022). The goal of this was to discredit Western news agencies and institutions who praised the volunteer group's efforts in Syria. A study of disinformation regarding the white helmets found 21,000 tweets making claims about the volunteer group colluding with terrorist organizations in Syria (Ibid).

These Russian disinformation claims have become mainstream: one of the members of popular music group Pink Floyd stated in 2018, during a concert in Barcelona, that the white helmets "create propaganda for the jihadists and terrorists" and that they "probably murdered 34 women and children" in a chemical attack (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2022, 5 & 9). These claims were relayed by official Russian government social media accounts (Ibid).

Additionally, the guilt narrative has been used to make Russian foreign policy seem more appealing. For example, the head of 'Rossiya Segodnya', the parent company to Sputnik and RIA Novosti, personally blamed the EU for not cooperating with Russia on the anti-terrorism front in the Middle East, which in his opinion resulted in the situation then (Nestoras 2019).

On other Russian state media broadcasting platforms, German Chancellor Merkel was blamed for the rise of neo-Nazis in Germany, due to her liberal migration policies (Ibid). Russia Today has also published many articles and video segments where it blames the EU for the mistreatment of refugees in Greece, alleging that promised funds never arrived, and in the process using the opportunity to 'bash' the decadent West and its failing institutions (Smirnova 2020).

The IRA was also involved on social media, through a trove of Twitter accounts posting about Merkel's responsibility in the wave of terrorist attacks between 2015-2016 (Dawson & Innes 2019). At the same time, other IRA social media accounts were posting strong support messages for Merkel, to amplify the different national narratives, to inflame an already difficult debate (Ibid).

The same occurred in the UK during the Brexit campaign, with IRA accounts tweeting about keeping Britain's borders shut to the migrants, while other accounts were discussing the refugee crossings between mainland Europe and Britain's shores (Ibid). By fueling both sides

of the debate, the Russians attempted to increase societal ideological cleavages. The goal when using migration as a pressure point in this IW operation, is to further drive cleavages, as the topic is divisive enough without Russian interjection into the debate (Tasch 2017). Furthermore, the consequences of these debates were oftentimes the rise of populist far-right, anti-EU or Euro-sceptic political parties, which not only sow division at the societal and inter-governmental levels, but also increases Russia's agents of influence in the Western political scene (Ibid).

The threat narrative is most definitely the more successful one, as the vitriol used to engage in this IW campaign resonated better with citizens of EU member states. There are many examples of misinformation published by Russian state media, intended for Western audiences, which played on fears to create the narrative of migration as a security threat.

One of those examples is Sputnik news publishing stories in English about an increase in sexual assaults in Sweden, which the outlet blamed on the country's 'open door policy' (Crisan 2019). However, the increase was due to a legal change, where sexual assaults are counted individually, which does show, on paper, Sweden facing a much bigger problem in that regard than its neighbors, though the source of the issue is the way these assaults are registered (Ibid). This misinformation piece was relayed by British politician Nigel Farage, a staunch far-right populist, who completely ignored the fact that Swedish sex offenses were numbered lower in 2015 than the year before (Ibid).

Other examples include posts on social media, notably on Twitter, to promote the idea that a Hijab wearing Muslim woman ignored victims of the 2017 London bridge attack, essentially alleging that all Muslims support these terrorist acts (Ibid). The account responsible for this claim, named '@SouthLoneStar', a name in reference to the US state of Texas, had 16,000 followers who adamantly 'retweeted' the post. The account was later found by US intelligence services to be a Russian account belonging to the IRA, with the goal of influencing American and British societal and political discourses (Ibid).

Perhaps the most well-known disinformation story regarding the threat narrative, is that of 'Lisa'. Russian speaking TV outlets and websites, including Russia Today and RT Deutsch, as well as organizations including the "International Convention of German-Russians", with Russians living in Germany as their main target, published the story of a German-Russian 13-

year-old girl named Lisa in Berlin. This story claimed that Lisa was kidnapped and brutally sexually assaulted by illegal migrants (Goncharenko 2016).

The Lisa story was quickly proved to be untrue by German prosecutors (Ibid), but the Russian government got involved and accused its German counterpart of protecting the migrants and orchestrating a cover up of all the crimes caused by Merkel's dangerous migration policies (Nestoras 2019). The same occurred after the 2015 New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne, where 1200 women were sexually assaulted; Russian foreign minister Lavrov claimed there was a cover up by the German police about migrants being responsible for the act (Alami 2018).

Though debunked by German authorities quickly, and later denied by Lisa herself (Withnall 2016), the Lisa story gained traction in the German-Russian communities in Germany, and led to a protest by members of said community in early 2016, gathering 700 people outside of Merkel's Berlin office (McGuinness 2016). This ability to mobilize a fifth column who are unknowingly played into IW operations, is particularly dangerous to Western societies where such communities exist.

NATO published an article about the Lisa case, correctly identifying attempts by Russia to meddle in German society and politics and demonstrating links between these German-Russian groups and neo-Nazis to organize the anti-migrant protests, as well as the influence of German-language based, Russian state-owned media, particularly Sputnik and RT Deutsch (Meister 2016). According to unnamed EU officials, intelligence reports suggest that the Kremlin has weekly meetings with the heads of state-owned news outlets, to discuss spin and narrative (Tasch 2017); surely, the Lisa case was one of those considering how far reaching it was, despite being disinformation.

Claims such as the Lisa story have on other occasions been relayed internationally by the Russian government, for example when Putin himself accused Austria of acquitting an Iraqi migrant, who had raped a young boy in 2016 (Crisan 2019). Putin stated the man was acquitted of the sexual assault, due to his inability to speak German, information on which the judges accepted to acquit him as a basis of his incapability to understand the boy's lack of consent (Ibid). Not only is this claim ridiculous, but it is also purely false as the perpetrator was already in custody when Putin spewed this disinformation (Ibid).

On top of physical threats, the threat narrative focused heavily on 'existential threats', those which are an affront to the Western way of life and its customs. For example, multiple Czech news outlets, none of them particularly popular, relayed Russian disinformation published by Sputnik about German schools forbidding pork products, to not offend their Muslim students (EEAS 2016). Another Czech online outlet called 'securitymagazin.cz', which currently has over 7000 subscribers on Facebook but only about 370 followers on Twitter, published other Sputnik falsehoods including Germany closing its door to migrants, which would result in migratory flows to the Czech Republic (Ibid).

In Slovakia, pro-Kremlin media and politicians focused on the existential threat posed by Muslim migrants, who are portrayed to have EU support, in an attempt at eroding trust in the EU and associated institutions (Izak 2019). The most recurrent topics approached by these media outlets and politicians were that the EU encourages Muslim migration to Europe, that the EU is 'surrendering to Islamization', and that as such the EU is undemocratic and harmful to national interests (Ibid). These stories, originally published by Sputnik and RT, were relayed by Slovak news outlets including 'Parlamentné listy' and 'Hlavné správy'. The latter was banned by the Slovak national security office in March 2022, as it was spreading harmful information regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine (TASR 2022).

Similar scenarios have been observed in Italy, where the influence of Sputnik's Italian language version led to its title as the second most prominent foreign news outlet in the country (Alandete & Verdu 2018). It has been said that Sputnik was successful in radicalizing the debate surrounding migration, through stories focusing on the replacement of native Italians by migrants or a potential civil war, as the Italian anti-immigrant communities on social media particularly enjoyed its 'rage bait' stories, designed to induce anger (Ibid). This influence can be attributed as a reason why parties such as 'Lega Nord' and 'Movimento 5 Stelle', both focusing on strong anti-migrant rhetoric, obtained such strong results in elections following the migrant crisis.

In Austria, the Freedom Party increased its votes two-fold in state elections that same year (Steinmayr 2017). The same occurred in Sweden with the 'Sverigedemokraterna' party, and in Germany with the 'Alternative für Deutschland' party (Ibid). France's 'Front National' had similar results. By polarizing societies through the threat narrative, Russia's IW campaigns have had strong effects on the rise of far-right parties across Europe.

Finally, the security narrative can almost be considered a public relations campaign at the state level. It aims to shape discourse around Russian projections of power, particularly those involving anti-terrorism efforts, and Russia's supposed traditional values (Nestoras 2019). After efforts to blame the EU for the migrant crisis, Russia was now portrayed as the only country that was targeting the issue at its source, and not just applying a band-aid on a large wound (Ibid). This is achieved through state outlets and political agents of influence.

RT and Sputnik emphasized Russian humanitarian efforts in Syria, while completely ignoring their Western counterparts (Ibid). French far right politician Le Pen, praised Russian efforts in Syria, and expressed her opinion that the US was in fact attempting to discredit those efforts by spreading disinformation about civilian deaths (AFP 2015).

These IW campaigns regarding migration did not stop after the 2015 crisis. Every attempt to capitalize from divisions regarding migration problems have been made use of. The Belarus migration, or migrant crisis, has been ongoing since May 28th, 2021; this date has been chosen due to statements made by Belarussian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, where he addressed the EU by stating: "We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves." (Evans 2021).

This statement was in response to sanctions imposed on Belarus by the EU, following the hijacking, and forced landing of a Ryanair flight on Belarussian territory, which was performed to arrest a Belarussian opposition activist on board (Grzywaczewski 2021). It also concerned Lithuanian and Polish support for Belarussian civil society activists, strongly opposed to the Lukashenko regime (Legucka & Bryjka 2021).

However, Belarussian plans did not simply involve an unguarded border; state-owned tourism boards in Belarus cooperated with Iraqi travel agencies, organizing the travel of thousands of migrants to Belarus, to then push them towards the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Polish borders from June 2021 (Grzywaczewski 2021) to a situation culminating with migrants freezing to death in the winter period of 2021-2022 (Tondo 2022).

The EU member states of Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Estonia issued joint statements condemning the 'hybrid attack' inflicted upon them through 'weaponized migration' by the Belarussian regime (Grzywaczewski 2021). Indeed, the regime led migrants to believe that

they would easily pass-through EU borders, to be welcomed with open arms; however, upon arrival to Belarus, they were loaded onto buses going to the border, and found themselves violently pushed by Belarussian riot police, urging them to cut through fences (BBC 2021). The Belarussian security forces also engaged in verbal confrontation with their Polish counterpart, as well as blinding them with strobe lights (Bodnar 2021).

The scale of this crisis is substantial: Poland recorded over 30,000 attempts to illegally cross the border from Belarus in 2021, 17,000 of those being in October 2021 alone (BBC 2021). In Lithuania, over 4000 attempts were made through 2021 (Ibid), which is 50 times more than in 2020 (Grzywaczewski 2021). Whilst the Eastern EU borders were closed by the member states, who held the line and refused to give into Lukashenko's blackmail tactics, the image and legality problem of pushbacks, and poorly equipped rudimentary migrant camps at the borders was a lose-lose situation.

Belarus is claimed to be propped up by Russia, who is reported to sponsor Lukashenko's continued political existence, through financial aid and political support, as well as IW operational support for domestic Belarussian audiences, through Russian state-owned media outlets, as was the case with the protests following the Belarussian elections (Mirovalev 2021). Through this engineered migration crisis, Russia and Belarus could also probe NATO Eastern flank defenses and responses, as well as determination (Legucka & Bryjka 2021).

The weaponization of migration has been described as 'lawfare': "a weapon designed to destroy the enemy by using, misusing, and abusing the legal system and the media in order to raise a public outcry against that enemy" (Lubinski 2022). This was successful: while the Eastern border EU member states stopped the flow of migration and blocked this aspect of the hybrid attack, the image problem, and legitimate accusations of illegality of their actions remained (Ibid).

Additionally, it caused a serious problem of moral grandstanding within the EU: while the member states affected by the crisis were perceiving their acts as a defense of the entire union and their own sovereignty, other member states were reluctant to approve of their methods and instead called for a humanitarian response (Andžāns et al. 2021).

Furthermore, on top of the actual crisis, Russia embarked on a disinformation campaign at the highest levels of statecraft: Putin himself stated that "Belarus has nothing to do with it" (Bodnar 2021, n.p.) and Kremlin press secretary Peskov said the accusations against Belarus are "absolutely wrong" (Ibid). Other high-ranking members of the Russian state used a guilt narrative in this crisis too: the spokeswoman of the foreign ministry, Zakharova, mentioned that "Minsk must not be blamed" (Ibid), and foreign minister Lavrov suggested that it was in fact Western policies and destabilizing wars in the Middle East which led to this situation (Ibid). Interestingly, the security and threat narratives of the 2015 migrant crisis were not seen in the Belarus example, most likely because the goals and opportunities are different.

It was also evident that Belarussian and Russian state-owned media outlets created what has been described as a 'symbiotic relationship' in their coverage of the crisis, with a narrative of guilt and brutalism on the EU member states (EUvsDisinfo 2021e). In fact, Russia Today set up a livestream of the situation at the Belarussian-Polish border, where it used drones to show conditions of makeshift camps and conducted interviews where some 'experts' accused Poland of conducting itself similarly to Nazi Germany's treatment of Jews and other 'undesirable' minorities (Ibid).

Moreover, Russia Today, broadcasting in English, German, French and Spanish amongst others, highlighted Belarussian efforts towards humanitarian aid, whilst simultaneously ignoring how the migrants arrived at the border (Bodnar 2021). Footage of Belarussian security services abusing, beating, and pushing the migrants was not shown at all (Ibid). Meanwhile, Sputnik emphasized Polish use of tear gas and water cannons and demanded sanctions in response (Ibid). The goal of all these images and narratives is to induce an emotional response by the audience; these emotions would then inflame the debate, prompting divisions and cleavages across stand points, with a resulting diminished trust and belief in institutions.

Again, high level Russian state officials used this footage and narratives to discredit Poland and the EU, for example when Russia's 'First Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the UN' accused the EU of revealing it's "true face" as those "rejecting and beating people who come to its borders for help" (Ibid, n.p.). Putin also made a point that the EU and its institutions promote humanism as one of their core values, but that this is not shown in practice (Ibid).

Proxy outlets have also been used in this situation, such as 'Redfish', a Berlin based media company incepted in 2017, which claims to be independent. Redfish has in the past published a movie about the London Grenfell tower tragedy (Moore 2018), pieces about trans-rights in Texas (Gilbert 2022), or even anti-Zionist videos about the Palestinian struggle (Haseman 2021). This left-leaning outlet, with 1.4 million subscribers across its various social media pages on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, or Facebook, is in fact a proxy outlet for the Kremlin (Davis 2018).

It was revealed that almost all of Redfish's employees came from Russia Today, with the managing director having also worked for Iranian state television in the past (Ibid). One of their reporters, Jelena Milincic, was previously a correspondent for the Spanish wing or Russia Today, whose mother is none other than the head of RT Serbia (Ibid).

Others have worked for Sputnik and 'In the Now', a previously Russia Today-affiliated show which then became its own service (Ibid). Throughout the Belarus migrant crisis, Redfish consistently shared stories about migrants who died due to Polish inactions (Bodnar 2021). Since March 2022, Redfish has seen its pages on Instagram and YouTube geo-blocked in certain countries including all member states of the EU, while its Twitter and Facebook pages have received the "Russia state-controlled media" label (Gilbert 2022).

Stories by Russian state-owned media have also been recirculated through various international outlets, and even picked up by some politicians. For example, a February 2022 story from Sputnik about Polish executions of migrants, found its way into a Lebanese online media outlet in June 2022 (EUvsDisinfo 2022), which was then shared on Twitter by British politician George Galloway. This story has its roots in claims made by a Polish defector to Belarus, who became a disinformation source, used by Belarus and Russian state-owned media, to dominate the narrative around the idea of Poland's inhumane treatment of migrants (CPDA 2022).

Galloway is currently suing Twitter, who has branded him "Russian state-affiliated media", a label he denies, even though he has a show on Russia Today, and had another show on Sputnik in the past (Ebrahimi 2022). His Twitter page, with over 440,000 followers, contains many pieces of disinformation following Russian narratives, with recent tweets in March about Ukraine sponsoring Islamic terrorism in Western Europe, or the US plans to commit 'false flag' attacks using weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine (Steerpike 2022). None of these offer

any proof to these claims, they are just statements with no verification to any information whatsoever.

4.2.1 Discussion

As with the last case study, it is difficult to obtain reliable quantitative data on the exact effect of the Russian IW campaigns surrounding migration. What can be argued though, is that there is a systematic attempt by Russian state-owned news outlets, Russian politicians, and proxy outlets, to inject polarization into debates which have strong ideological rivalries.

Not only is Russia directly responsible in causing migratory flows, both through military campaigns and through 'hybrid attacks', but Russia also engages in dangerous narrative production, with the goal of eliciting strong emotional reactions. These reactions by Western audiences have effects in politics, as can be seen through election results following crucial elections in various EU member states during and after the 2015 migration crisis.

It is demonstrable that far-right parties across Europe directly benefited from the 2015 migration crisis. The Brexit campaign, which followed a strong 'borders closed' approach to policy, was successful in part due to the migration crisis. France, Italy, Germany, Austria, and Sweden all saw the rise of far-right parties in respective elections. It is no coincidence that many of Europe's anti-immigration parties praise Russia's policy goals, and at the same time benefit from Russian influence in anti-migration debates.

The Belarus migration crisis differed in context, as it was obvious to all that the crisis was artificial, in that the migrants were flown in for nefarious purposes. However, the management of the crisis had several impacts on Western societies and institutions such as NATO but primordially the EU. Russian IW operations focused on narratives consisting of misinformation, showing real events with no context, or portrayed in a deceiving way, and disinformation, with invented stories to tarnish government responses.

Russia makes deliberate use of vitriolic discourse surrounding these crises, on both sides of the political debate, using disinformation, misinformation and psychological manipulation meant to create or further emotions such as fear, anger, and hate. These methods are part of a strategic campaign to weaken European societies at all levels, from individual societies to intra-governmental and supra-governmental partnerships. What this demonstrates is a willingness to inject toxic rhetoric in polarizing debates, with the sole aim being to weaken and fragment

societies, as divided enemies are weaker than one unified bloc in the face of Russian foreign policy and security goals.

The recurring theme of Western politicians and famous individuals becoming mouth pieces for Russian IW campaigns is worrying to say the least. The ability to mobilize ethnic Russians in Germany through disinformation surrounding migration debates is even more so. The threats posed to the Baltic states and Poland through weaponized migration and the IW campaign focusing on the Belarus migrant crisis represent the Russian disposition to its revisionist goals.

These forms of strategic efforts to consistently weaken societies across the West are not as opportunistic as what was demonstrated with COVID-19 IW efforts. They are a real threat to societies across the West, by fomenting the rise of political parties with desires to leave institutions such as the EU or NATO, which would directly benefit Russian revisionist goal. It is also reasonable to assume that crises and IW efforts surrounding them, such as the example from Belarus, are not going to disappear; Finland has recently passed a law to enhance border protections on its Eastern flank, believing Russia will weaponize migration in response to Finland’s NATO membership bid (AFP 2022).

5. Case Studies: Russian Information Warfare aimed at 'the West' Concerning the Invasion of Ukraine

This section will focus on multiple IW efforts by Russia, meant to influence Western perceptions of the invasion of Ukraine, its causes, and its consequences, including rhetoric surrounding Ukraine's very existence, or Ukrainian refugees across Europe.

5.1 Russian pre-Invasion Information Warfare Campaigns to Vilify Ukraine in the West

Whilst the efforts by Russia to manipulate the Ukrainian population from 2014 onwards, through IW campaigns, are well studied in academia and relevant literature, the campaigns aimed at the West surrounding the buildup to the current situation in 2022 are less so. It has been mentioned many times that Putin's invasion of Russia claims to 'denazify' Ukraine (Berger 2022), which is a talking point that both domestic Russian, and Western audiences should in theory rally behind. However, the IW campaigns by Russia against the West in this context appear to have failed.

To have a more specific focus, this case study will begin in September 2020. It will focus on Russian efforts not only vilify Ukraine prior to the invasion, but also on Russian efforts to legitimize the invasion. This timeline is chosen, as on September 14th, 2020, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy officiated a new 'National Security Strategy' (Getmanchuk 2020).

This document made lengthy mentions of Ukraine's plans to develop a partnership with NATO, which would eventually culminate in NATO membership (NATO 2022). The Russian state and its revisionist foreign policy goals, some of which had already been achieved through the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the support of separatist 'people's republics' in Eastern Ukraine starting that same year, did not approve of this perceived existential threat.

Since 2014, NATO had helped in training Ukrainian soldiers and officers, to boost capabilities and readiness (Ibid). The 2020 Ukrainian national security strategy also highlighted the role of Russia in fueling further separatism, corruption, organized crime, and the threat of "intelligence and subversive activities against Ukraine" (Getmanchuk 2020). Russia has been accused of fueling corruption in Ukraine, to then claim that Ukrainians need to be rescued by Russia from

this endemic and Ukrainian government-specific problem (Falk 2022). In January 2021, Zelenskyy made a public appeal to US President Biden for NATO membership, and to signal their resolve, the Ukrainian government froze the assets of the most influential pro-Kremlin opposition leader in the Ukrainian parliament, Medvechuk, for his role in sponsoring separatism in Eastern Ukraine (Reuters 2022a).

The Ukrainian government also took down pro-Kremlin TV channels, owned by Medvechuk, who is himself a friend to Putin, to the point of having gone on holidays together and Putin being the godfather to Medvechuk's daughter (Shuster 2022). Needless to say, Medvechuk was Putin's personal agent of influence in Kiev, both through his political status and his media outlets.

Amidst the continuing war in the Donbas, and fears by Russia that Ukraine would soon go on the offensive, the Russians amassed large amounts of troops on Ukraine's Eastern borders around April of 2021 (Bielieskov 2021). Russian troops were already numerous in the area due to the ongoing war, there were already almost 90,000 soldiers, who had been organized there between 2014-2016 as a permanent force on the Ukrainian border; not only were these forces there as a deterrent, but also as a psychological tool, a reminder of the threat if Ukraine were to go against Russian wishes (Ibid).

The official reason given by the Russian minister of defense, Shoigu, was that these exercises were a defensive act to react to NATO exercises in Europe, spanning from Portugal to Germany and Romania (Ibid). Furthermore, the Russians saw Ukrainian troop movements towards the East as preparations for an offensive in the Donbas, in a move potentially inspired by the events of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Ibid). This line of reasoning was based on Ukrainian purchases of offensive Unmanned Aerial Vehicles or UAVs, such as the now famous Bayraktar TB-2 (Ibid).

However, the political sub-text to Russian troop movements was also an attempt at posturing, sending strong signals to the newly appointed Biden administration that the status quo in Ukraine would not change to perceived US interests (Ibid). It was also a clear sign to Ukraine that attempts and willingness to join NATO would result in offensive actions by Russia, as having (additional) NATO members on its borders is simply put a geopolitical disaster to Russian goals.

Additionally, the scale of the deployment, and the origins and destinations of newly arrived equipment made it abundantly clear that it was much beyond the scope of a regular exercise, leading to fears about potential permanent deployment to surround Ukraine's Eastern borders (Funaiole et al. 2021).

This can be considered as an act of IW. The posturing by Russian troops around Ukraine were a subversive act through psychological results aimed not only at the Ukrainian population, but also at Western audiences, who would interpret Putin's goals as defense of a perceived common people. This was partially achieved by highlighting the Russian resolve towards Ukraine, which Putin personally considers a 'fraternal nation', who is bound to Russia by shared history and culture (Shuster 2022). It was also an attempt to fracture Western support for Ukraine, hinting at the costs associated with foreign aid: Russia was willing to use military force to achieve its revisionist goals.

To create narratives in the West surrounding the situation in Ukraine, the usual methods have been observed. From high level politicians including Putin himself, to state-owned news media and the proxy outlets, all facets of the Russian IW capabilities have been used to inflame debates in the West. For example, in July 2021, Putin published an article where he described the shared ethnic, cultural, and religious past of the 'Ancient Rus' people, which have become the Belarussians, Russians and Ukrainians (Putin 2021).

This narrative makes use of a 'historical memory', an instrument of IW which is best explained as a discursive act which "does not contain much objective information about the events of the past […], it contains the events of the past presented in a certain way according to subjective perceptions and evaluations" (Pakhomenko et al. 2018, 299).

Putin has also claimed that modern Ukraine is a Bolshevik invention from 1919, ignoring historical facts about a distinct Ukrainian existence through culture, language, and self-determination movements (Sukhov 2022). Putin also claims that that Russia was "robbed" when the Soviet Republics gained independence (Putin 2021). Ukraine is described as Russia's "natural complementary economic partners" (Ibid), which is no longer looking up to Russia due to a 'forced change of identity', led by foreign and extremist interference, focusing specifically on Nazis within the country and the US (Ibid).

Most attempts have focused on accusing Ukraine of being at the heart of the conflict, due to its mistreatment of ethnic Russians, even going as far as claiming a genocide was taking place, or that the EU was discriminating against Russians in Crimea and elsewhere through sanctions, both statements made by Putin himself, and repeated through state outlets such as Russia Today amongst others (EU DGNEN 2022). Other reasons given include the supposed aggressive actions by NATO in conjunction with Ukraine, to undermine Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ibid).

Alongside these allegations of 'Russophobia' and genocide, disinformation stories have been published in English by Russian state-owned outlets such as TASS, or in French by Sputnik and Russia Today, who in April of 2021 claimed that Ukrainian soldiers had used drones to drop a bomb on a mother and her five-year old child in Donetsk oblast (EUvsDisinfo 2021d).

However, investigative journalists found a more credible version of events after interviewing locals: an explosion did occur inside a house but was an accident, after a child found a landmine collected by his grandfather; this version seems to go along with reports made by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, who also had investigators on the ground (StopFake 2021). It is also noteworthy to mention that the mother of the child, who was claimed to survive, never came forward about the story, and no names were ever given (Ibid).

Other stories dating from before September 2020 had made claims of Ukrainian organ trafficking rings, where the organs had allegedly been collected from ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine, or that the Ukrainian army was operating mobile crematoriums to dispose of the corpses of murdered ethnic Russians (Devlin & Robinson 2022). However, the OSCE never found evidence to these claims (Ibid).

One recurring theme, comparable to a guilt narrative, is the idea that NATO and the West broke any agreements when allowing Central and Eastern European countries to join NATO. Gorbachev, at the time the first and last President of the Soviet Union, during the breakup of the USSR, discussed these agreements in the past: "The topic of "NATO expansion" was not discussed at all […] Not a single Eastern European country raised the issue […].Another issue we brought up was discussed: making sure that NATO's military structures would not advance and that additional armed forces from the alliance would not be deployed on the territory of the

then-GDR after German reunification. […] It has been observed all these years." (Korshunov 2014).

This quote thus disproves any allegations made by the Russian state about assurances made by NATO to the then dissolving USSR. The verbal agreements or 'promises', only regarded East-Germany, and as per Gorbachev, all talks regarding this were done so in the East-German context (Ibid). It is also ironic considering that Russia breached actual agreements, namely the Budapest memorandum of 1994 where Russia agreed to respect Ukrainian sovereignty and its borders. On top of this, NATO is a defensive pact with an 'open doors' policy, meaning that states themselves ask to join the alliance, NATO has never asked anyone to join (EEAS 2022). The question then remains as to why the countries closer to Russia were and continue to be adamant about NATO's role in the region, hinting that perhaps Russia's revisionist goals are to blame for the expansion, rather than the voluntary applicants.

Further attempts at changing the narrative were made by Russian politicians; most of these were made in Russian, but because these were picked up by international media, Russian narratives permeated globally. For example, Medvedev, the ex-President, ex-Prime Minister, and current deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, claimed Ukraine to be a vassal to the US, and that Zelenskyy should be replaced before Russia engage in discussion with Ukraine (Moscow Times 2021).

As part of these claims, the idea that Ukraine is strongly held up by neo-Nazis and fascists, for which Zelenskyy should be ashamed of due to his Jewish roots (Ibid). However, the political groups with ultranationalist or even ethno-nationalist views, united under the 'Svoboda' party, only obtained 2.2% in elections in 2019, meaning they did not gain any seats in the Ukrainian parliament (Sukhov 2022).

Russia has also made many mentions of its UN resolution initiative to condemn the glorification of Nazism (Devlin & Robinson 2022). Whilst most NATO and EU members abstained from the vote on this resolution at the UN, Ukraine, and the US both voted against it, as they believed it to be Russian attempts to legitimize IW campaigns (Ibid). Both states did condemn the act of glorifying Nazism in their explanations for their votes (Ibid).

Mythos Labs is an organization that devotes itself to fighting misinformation amongst other areas, that has conducted research for the US State Department, the European Commission and various UN offices. In a 2022 study focused on pro-Russian disinformation regarding Ukraine taking place on Twitter, they found an increase of 3270% in posts containing pro-Russian disinformation from September to December 2021 (Mythos Labs 2022).

Over 50% of these accounts were posting in English, with discourse focusing on the West's involvement in Ukraine being responsible for the conflict, and a distraction to various domestic problems ranging from migration to terrorism (Ibid). Almost all these accounts served to not only inflame debates, but also to amplify Russian state-owned media and proxy website content (Ibid).

Some of these Tweets were then picked up by larger accounts, for example Australian journalist John Pilger who shared stories about US involvement in Ukraine's politics to his 210,000 followers, or US Republican congressman Matt Gaetz who demanded that Biden ignore Ukraine in favor of the US-Mexico border issues (Ibid). These accounts were trying to get their own agenda across, but either unknowingly or apathetically were re-Tweeting Russian IW campaign goals.

The largest attempt at changing the narrative around Russia's foreign policy aspirations, was a list of demands by Russia, published on December 17th, 2021 (Roth 2021). The demands expressed Russia's desire to obtain 'legal guarantees', regarding a ban on the proposed membership of Ukraine in NATO, and the pullback of any NATO forces of equipment in the countries which joined the organization after 1997 (Pifer 2021). It is important to mention that until Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, NATO had almost no equipment or forces in the member countries in question (Ibid).

This can be considered part of a victim narrative pushed by the Kremlin, which claims that Russia is slowly being encircled by NATO, though only 6% of its land borders are shared with NATO members (Seskuria 2022). There are also claims that 'the West' is constantly trying to pull the post-Soviet states into its sphere of influence; others argue that those countries, such as Georgia or Ukraine, have a realistic view of Russia's goals and nefarious plans for their countries, and thus have come to view Russia negatively (Ibid).

On top of this, the demands made in December 2021 were so extreme that some concluded they were meant for rejection by design, to play into the Kremlin's narratives of a fearful Russia and an unreasonable West (Pifer 2021).

In late January 2022, Putin stated that the West had ignored Russia's security concerns and demand for guarantees (Soldatkin & Marrow 2022). What is interesting is that Putin made distinctions between the US and NATO, rather than addressing NATO as a whole; some have mentioned that this could be amplify the view that NATO may not operate without blessing from the US (Ibid). This would constitute another attempt at sowing divisions in the West.

5.1.1 Discussion

The usual methods of IW waging by Russia are observed in the context of the pre-invasion attempts to control the narratives surrounding Ukraine. However, in this case, the Kremlin itself, through published articles, statements and demands, has played a much larger role than in the other case studies. It can be argued that this is because the Kremlin was engaging in strategic communication and IW campaigns simultaneously. Yet, the state-owned media outlets were nonetheless present in the information realm, as were proxy websites, social media networks and agents of influence.

It can also be argued that the Russians understood that they most likely would not change anyone in the West's views about the conflict in Eastern Ukraine: war is a horrible occurrence, and no one wishes for it. However, the attempts at creating narratives that it is in fact Ukraine and the West who are responsible for war, by destabilizing Russia's regional security policies, were somewhat successful in their reach. These narratives were spread at the level of the Russian state, the UN, various Western politicians, spread through NATO and EU communications in attempts to address them, and as a result international news media; they were thus propagated internationally.

The fact that they were widely propagated does not indicate that they obtained any traction within Western societies. In January 2022, thus nearing the invasion and following the months long IW campaigns by Russia, a poll by the European Council on Foreign Relations found that 60% of 5500 European respondents wanted NATO or the EU to help Ukraine militarily in the event of an invasion (Krastev & Leonard 2022). In February 2022, as the danger posed by Russia became more evident, a poll conducted by 'Euroskopia' in Western Europe found that almost 75% of 8000 respondents wanted an EU-coordinated military response if Russia invaded Ukraine (Gijs 2022).

Considering the ongoing relentless support for Ukraine, by NATO members and the EU member states, it can be assumed that the views shared by Russia's governments and its outlets did not become mainstream in the West, rather remaining truth only to various fringe communities and conspiracy theorists. This support shall be expanded upon in the following section. It can safely be said that the Russian actions in Ukraine have entirely shifted Western

geopolitical concerns, particularly in Europe, where war was thought to be unthinkable prior to the Russian invasion.

5.2 Russian Post-Invasion Information Warfare Campaigns to Lower Support for Ukraine and the Ukrainians

During the last 5 months, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there have been many IW campaigns aimed at the West, with the goal of diminishing the support of Ukraine stemming from the West. This support has happened at the political level, with many high-level diplomatic visits to Kiev by Western officials, but also through a massive military aid campaign, as well as a plethora of fundraisers targeting Western populations who have donated large amounts of funds to Ukraine and its military.

Commentators of the conflict have proposed the notion that Ukraine is overwhelmingly winning the IW side of the war (Cockerell 2022; Talant 2022). From the personal role of Zelenskyy in sending out strong worded messages on social media, both in Ukrainian and English, to reach international audiences, to major Ukrainian oligarch-owned broadcasting companies amplifying the state narratives about the war, Ukraine's communication strategies have a stark contrast to Russia's (Talant 2022).

One concept that has helped bolster international support for Ukraine through social media is the so-called 'memetic warfare', the use of 'memes', which are pictures and videos, shared for comedic purpose (Rowett 2018). However, whilst memes are, at face value, simple social media shared items intended to make an audience laugh at a specific topic, they are more importantly "behaviours, concepts, norms and ideas that are transmitted and copied between humans" (Ibid, 4437).

Often unconsciously, memes can transfer ideas to their recipients, working through the basic tenants of propaganda: spreading influence and shaping minds (Ibid). This tactic was used by the RIA in many of its previous IW campaigns, with the most famous being the US 2016 elections.

However, Ukrainian memetic warfare, which has centered around snappy videos and funny pictures, oftentimes posted by official government accounts, such as the Ukrainian ministry of defense Twitter account, have a clear target audience: English speaking Westerners. In 2017, the Ukrainian government passed into law the banning of Russian social media site 'VKontakte' and Russian search engine 'Yandex' (EuroMaidanPress 2019). For 'Vkontakte',

this meant a drop by 60% in users, while Google analytics claim this drop was by 80% in users (Bay et al. 2019).

The resulting increase in Ukrainian use of 'Western' social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram amongst others, has led to a Ukrainian advantage in reaching Western audiences (Talant 2022). Due to this, Ukraine instrumentally used social media to control the narrative about the Russian invasion, a narrative which became the monolithic 'zeitgeist' in Western minds.

Furthermore, Western social media were proactive in banning or 'geo-locking' several Russian outlets, including RT and Sputnik, which limited the spread of Russian state-owned outlet IW efforts. On Twitter, whilst state-owned channels were banned, other influential figures and pages were marked as "Russian state-affiliated media", also preventing them from appearing in the 'top searches' section (Dwoskin & Zakrzewski 2022).

Video sharing platform YouTube had blocked the state-owned outlets in Europe, but eventually enacted a world-wide ban (France24 2022). Additionally, Facebook announced in late February that it had identified and removed a Russian information operation, which was amplifying disinformation through proxy-outlets; the social media giant also claimed it stopped attempts to hack the accounts of some Ukrainian politicians (Dwoskin & Zakrzewski 2022).

This IW ring stopped by Facebook was linked to NewsFront, previously discussed for its role in the COVID-19 IW campaigns, and its links to the FSB. On top of bans on Western social media, Russian state-owned outlets took a severe hit when the European Commission decided to suspend their entire broadcasting ability throughout the EU (Council of the EU 2022). The reason state for this ban in the EU is the "systematic, international campaign of disinformation, information manipulation and distortion of facts in order to enhance its strategy of destabilisation of its neighbouring countries, the EU and its member states" (Ibid, n.p.).

Through these various bans of Russian state-owned outlets, institutions such as the EU, and social media companies, were attempting to curb the spread of pro-Kremlin narratives regarding the invasion; this has arguably been extremely effective. However, some disinformation and misinformation attempts have been found, focusing on specific topics such as the Ukrainian refugees, or falsehoods about Ukrainian IW campaigns.

For example, one study has shown that accounts belonging to the IRA were spreading disinformation, by reusing old footage from climate protests in Vienna which occurred in early 2022 (Silverman & Kao 2022). This footage claimed that Ukrainians were lying about deaths using ‘crisis actors’, by showing a scene where body-bags could be seen moving in the background, the posters telling their audience that the bodies had ‘come back to life’; however, the footage was highlighting a performative protest where climate activists laid down in body bags in Vienna (Ibid).

Not only were some of the accounts posting this disinformation already identified as stemming with the IRA, but further investigation revealed that the accounts posted during work hours consistent with St. Petersburg time zone, where the IRA is located, and that they did not post on Russian national holidays or weekends, an unusual practice for social media users (Ibid). These accounts, claiming to be individuals, were found across Twitter, TikTok and Instagram, totaling over 250 million content views (Ibid).

The journalists involved in the investigation reported these accounts and reached out to the social media companies for comment; while the accounts were removed, and their pro-Kremlin stances were acknowledged, the platforms did not attribute them to the IRA (Ibid). The journalists involved and the Clemson Media Forensics Hub of the Clemson University, are all adamant that these accounts do belong to the IRA (Ibid).

The idea that these accounts belong to the IRA is echoed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the UK, which has identified networks on social media who spread pro-Russia and pro-Putin posts on TikTok and Instagram, to then recruit more ‘supporters’ on Telegram, to amplify the narratives further (Booth 2022). Comments under the social media pages of figures such as Boris Johnson, music group Daft Punk or DJs such as David Guetta and Tiesto, aimed to expose a large and diverse audience to Kremlin IW narratives (Ibid).

It was also observed that the content has changed in nature: it is not possible to spread it through the typical channels, so Russian intelligence services have learned to create ‘authentic’ accounts, spreading falsehoods that appear organic, in a manner polite enough to not warrant bans on social media platforms (Ibid). The seemingly authentic posts inspire confidence in their intended audience; though this method is not novel and was observed with KGB-era active

measures through agents of influence, it is evident that Russian intelligence services have adapted to sanctions and to the age of social media.

In Poland, Russia has been accused of spreading disinformation about Ukrainian refugees, accusing them through various proxy-outlets and social media channels of causing a crime wave (Brzozowski & Michalopoulos 2022). These disinformation claims wanted to portray the refugees as being the cause of a rise in burglary and sexual assault numbers; not only is this rise non-existent, but the local police services have commented to explain that refugees have not been involved in many violent incidents (Ibid). On the refugee end, Russian Telegram channels made disinformation claims about starving Ukrainians in Polish refugee centers, and disinformation about which routes to take to get to Poland; the routes are in fact chosen purposely due to the danger they present (Ibid).

Other stories in Polish social media have concerned the supposed ‘special privileges’ granted to Ukrainian refugees, racism at the border or non-Ukrainian migrants crossing the Polish border. Most of the sources cited for these stories belonged to fake social media accounts with Russian e-mail domains or were even shared by the Russian embassy in Poland (EDMO 2022). Similar stories occurred in Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, all countries which are the main recipients of Ukrainian refugees (Ibid). Such posts have also been written or shared by far-right members of parliament in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, but not Romania (Ibid).

In Germany, pro-Kremlin social media accounts focused on a story claiming that Ukrainian refugees accidentally burnt a house a down while attempting to burn a Russian flag; a video showing the house burning turned out to be from 2013, in an event that had nothing to do with refugees or Russian flags (Euronews 2022).

Another story on TikTok falsely claimed that Ukrainian refugees had beaten a Russian speaking boy to death in a small town near Cologne, Germany, a fabricated story mentioned to contain the “hallmarks of disinformation spread […] by Russian state actors” (Stanley-Becker & Rosenzweig-Ziff 2022). Germany is considered by EUvsDisinfo to be the main target of Russian IW campaigns in Europe (Baczynska 2021), perhaps because of the previously discussed Russo-German population, which has been mobilized by disinformation efforts in the past.

While these stories focus on attempts to vilify Ukrainian refugees, other stories have focused on sowing cleavages through disinformation about the treatment of Ukrainian refugees in the EU. For example, a disinformation story in Czech news claimed that Ukrainians were banned from stores in Prague, using a doctored image. This story originated from a fake social media account, which was then amplified by pro-Kremlin groups on Russian social media Telegram (Dejaifve 2022b). While the original poster was not identified as being linked to Russia in any way, Russian proxy-outlets amplified the story.

Charles University was also notably hit by 'Russophobia'-centric disinformation claiming that Russian students were being expelled due to their nationality (Lazarova & Pika 2022). The Russian ministry of education echoed these falsehoods and stated that any Russian student expelled from Western universities based on their nationality could study for free in Russia; Klara Hyláková, the spokeswoman for Charles University, denied that any Russian student going by the name given in Russian state-owned media outlets had left the university that semester (Ibid).

An example of misinformation targeting Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria claimed that refugees were kicked out from a hotel and that the EU's 'love is over' (Dejaifve 2022b). In fact, the video used to share this story was a group of Ukrainian refugees relocated from one resort to another, as opposed to being sent out of the country (Ibid). This story was originally posted by a pro-Kremlin Twitter account, with the post making this disinformation claim being re-Tweeted over 30,000 times (Ibid).

In Latvia, the Russian embassy made several social media misinformation posts concerning a Ukrainian refugee pictured in public wearing a camouflage shirt donning the emblem of the infamous 'Azov battalion' (Dejaifve 2022a), which was created by neo-Nazi ultranationalist Ukrainians, but has arguably lost this political ideology, as proven by the fact that their current commander who is now a prisoner of war, is in fact Jewish (Reuters 2022d).

This statement is also supported by Ukraine's national guard, who says the battalion has 'reformed' (Ibid). The man pictured was not a refugee, but a Latvian national who expressed that he was supporting the battalion's battle in Mariupol at the time, where they held an infamous last stand in a steel factory (Dejaifve 2022a). No far right or neo-Nazi content was found on any of this man's social media channels (Ibid).

In Belgium, a video claimed to show a Ukrainian refugee assaulting a man in traditional Hasidic Jewish attire, supposedly an antisemitic assault (Ibid). Whilst the attacker was in fact Ukrainian, he was a long-term resident of Antwerp and not a refugee, and the police reports indicate that he was a belligerent drunk who intimidated others in the same incident, dubbed non-antisemitic (Ibid). Once again, though the original poster is not linked to Russia in any way, the misinformation incident was amplified by pro-Kremlin channels on social media (Ibid).

A picture of a Ukrainian woman with a Swastika tattoo on her buttocks was shared with two stories differing on geography, one claimed she was a Ukrainian refugee in Spain, the other in Italy (Ibid). Upon further research and reverse image searches, the image was found to stem from a Telegram channel from June 2021, with a story detailing how the woman had to leave a public beach in Odessa, Ukraine, after other beachgoers complained to her about her tattoos (Ibid). In Italy, the photo was shared by pro-Kremlin accounts, with some of them sporting the communist hammer and sickle symbol in their account names (Ibid).

On top of attempting to sow divisions in Western societies regarding Ukrainian refugees, Russia has engaged in the spreading of disinformation and misinformation at the state level. Many of these IW operations are spread through Western media, but more often than not, they are spread with the aim of ‘debunking’ and ‘fact checking’; Western media publish these narratives essentially to shoot them down and attack their credibility.

In early March, numerous Russian state-owned outlets including TASS, RIA Novosti and Interfax published articles claiming that Ukraine was creating ‘dirty bombs’ in Chernobyl, with the goal of unleashing radioactive blasts across Russia (Reuters 2022b). This claim was amplified by Putin himself, who mentioned it to be a pretext for the invasion of Ukraine, as a preemptive strike to defend his country (Ibid).

A few days later, the head of the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops of the Russian Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General Igor Kirillov, stated that evidence found in Ukraine suggested that laboratories in Ukraine, run by the US and NATO, were creating biological weapons (Cadier et al. 2022). This was amplified through state-owned media outlets and social media users. These weapons were claimed to be made to specifically target Slavs, which biological experts have refuted as such a weapon is impossible to make (Ibid). A group of

Russian biologists also made such statements, placing their own lives at risk in the process (Mackey 2022).

Not only is this reminiscent of the KGB-era AIDS disinformation, but this conspiracy theory has also been spliced with others, with claims that Hunter Biden, the son of incumbent US President Joe Biden, is involved in funding these labs through his investment fund 'Rosemont Seneca' (Cadier et al. 2022).

While it is true that there are US funded laboratories in Ukraine, they focus on the prevention of infectious diseases, and Hunter Biden was only involved in data and analytics systems, not any biological research (Ibid). This IW operation not only attempts to give a narrative of self-defense to the Russian invasion, but it also aims to target the fringe groups in the US who would use this 'evidence' to further their political agendas in the US.

Forged documents were released in April 2022, through a Telegram channel named 'Rezident', which Ukraine's SBU intelligence service claim is operated by the Russian GRU, claiming that the Ukrainian army was suffering from shortages because corrupt officials had sold crucial army munitions and weaponry stocks in Africa (Ibid).

The documents were not up to Ukraine's ministry of defense specifications, and some names contained the Russian as opposed to Ukrainian spellings (Ibid). This piece of disinformation not only played on the Russian claims that corruption in Ukraine is such a problem that external interference in the country became legitimate, but it was also aimed at Western audiences to create the image of an impotent Ukrainian army.

Other accusations of corruption have targeted Ukrainian President Zelenskyy himself. For example, the leader of Dutch political party 'Forum voor Democratie', Thierry Baudet, made baseless claims on Twitter that Zelenskyy had obtained $850 million through corruption since he became president (Ibid). Baudet has repeatedly been accused of having ties to the Kremlin by various Dutch news media and other politicians, and one investigation obtained text messages where he was discussing payments he received from 'a Russian who works for Putin' (Zembla 2020).

These claims were amplified by Russia Today, Sputnik News and RIA Novosti, finding their way to US broadcaster FoxNews, specifically on Tucker Carlson's show, who in the second quarter of 2020 averaged 4.3 million viewers per show (Katz 2020). It also found its way to the Twitter account of a Washington based radio host, in a post that was re-Tweeted almost 40,000 times (Cadier et al. 2022).

IW operations by Russia and Belarus have targeted specific incidents throughout the war, such as the Mariupol theatre airstrike, the Bucha massacre, a missile hit targeting civilians in Kramatorsk, Ukraine, or the missile strike on the Mariupol hospital, amongst others. All these incidents were addressed at the state level, with deflections of blame being the central topic.

In mid-March, the Russian ministry of defense claimed that the Azov battalion had planted explosives in the Mariupol theatre, which was used as a rudimentary air raid shelter by civilians, who went as far as painting the word 'children' in Russian on two different locations of the theatre's roof (Ibid). Numerous experts and organizations including the OSCE, or Human Rights Watch, have produced evidence stating that it was a bomb from a Russian airplane which killed as many as 600 civilians (Hinnant et al. 2022).

In early April, the Russian ministry of foreign affairs claimed that no civilians had been killed at all in Bucha, Ukraine (Cadier et al. 2022). When satellite imagery evidence showed that a massacre had indeed taken place, after Russian troops took control of the town, Belarussian dictator Lukashenko made a baseless claim stating that it was in fact British troops who had orchestrated the massacre (Batchelor 2022).

After a missile hit the train station in Kramatorsk, Ukraine, killing at least 50 civilians, the Russian ministry of defense claimed it did not operate the missile used, a 'Tochka-U', but that Ukraine does (Cadier et al. 2022). Whilst it is true that Ukraine does operate this missile system, open-sourced footage of the Russian army using this same missile system in the invasion of Ukraine has emerged, and it can also be seen in Russian service in videos from 2021, released by the Russian ministry of defense itself (Bellingcat 2022). This missile system was also observed when Russia amassed troops on the Ukrainian border in April 2021 (Ibid).

Following a missile strike on the hospital in Mariupol, the Russian embassy in the UK embarked on a Twitter thread showcasing supposed evidence that the event was staged in an

abandoned hospital by Ukraine's intelligence services. The embassy claimed that photos taken by the Associated Press showed crisis actors, with the evidence relying on the resemblance of two different women; the one woman identified is a Ukrainian beauty 'blogger', which served as further 'proof' that her wounds were makeup (Cadier et al. 2022).

Due to the severe backlash received from audiences on Twitter, the embassy switched narratives and claimed that the hospital was indeed active, but that it was a base for the Azov battalion (Ibid). This was also echoed and amplified by Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister (Ibid). The Russian embassy in Israel posted pictures hinting that the hospital had Ukrainian tanks on its grounds before the missile hit, which would supposedly make it a legitimate military target; the pictures provided were in fact of a different building approximately 10 kilometers away from the hospital (Ibid).

In late May, the Russian minister of defense Shoigu claimed that the offensive in Ukraine was slowing down on purpose to avoid civilian casualties, specifically due to ceasefires and to allow for humanitarian corridors (Echols 2022); the last four paragraphs highlight that Russia has not shied away from killing civilians ruthlessly, to then attempting various coverups at the state level. Analysts explained that the slowdown was almost certainly due to Russia's inability to fight a high-mobility war, and that the casualties in Russia's ranks were so numerous that they most likely affected every logistical level of the Russian army (Ibid).

Some pro-Russia protests have been observed in European societies, particularly in Germany, with members of the Russo-German communities in various cities demonstrating their support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and decrying perceived Russophobia (Reuters 2022c). They were outnumbered by pro-Ukrainian protests in Frankfurt, Hanover and Berlin, and the protests were named 'parades of shame' by various German mainstream media (DW 2022).

While small pro-Russia protests did occur in Germany and Serbia, most protests regarding the invasion of Ukraine, were against the Russian invasion. More than 100,000 people marched to support Ukraine in Berlin, 70,000 attended a pro-Ukraine rally in Prague, thousands attended similar protests in Rome, Brussels, Paris, Barcelona, Washington DC, or Toronto (Al Jazeera 2022).

Furthermore, Western countries have heavily supplied Ukraine with money and guns: from anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, to drones, helicopters, small arms, and artillery, no country has received so much foreign support during a war this century; aid has come from most members of NATO, Japan, Finland, Ireland, and Australia amongst others (Duggal & Ali 2022). This has been done with little to no backlash by most segments of Western populations, except for some comments about pieces of equipment sent to Ukraine which could potentially hit targets inside Russia.

However, whilst Western audiences overwhelmingly support Ukraine, and commentators constantly ridicule claims made by Russia either at the state level, through its state-owned media outlet, proxy-networks or even non-Russians who support Russia on social media, many argue that the West is not the targeted audience of many IW operations.

For example, in early March 2022, a Twitter hashtag named '#IStandWithPutin', alternatively '#IStandWithRussia', gained 23 million mentions on the platform. Analysis of the individual accounts reposting the hashtag the most, around 10,000 accounts, found that many were hacked, fake or brand-new accounts (Cockerell 2022). A disinformation researcher from the Demos thinktank explained that this Twitter campaign is most likely targeting Africa and Asia, judging by the previous themes the 10,000 accounts focused on: Indian and Pakistani relations, colonial legacy in Africa, and specifically the trial around South African ex-President Zuma's corruption case (Ibid).

Most of the mentions were not strictly disinformation, but a form of narrative-shaping referred to as 'whataboutism', the practice of making a counteraccusation or bringing up a similar event performed by another actors. For example, many accounts questioned why Russia was being reprimanded by the international community for its invasion of Ukraine, and why the coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan were not, or why NATO's involvement in Yugoslavia did not amount to the same (Ibid).

Africa in particular has been targeted by these messages, perhaps due to historic ties between the Soviet Union and its African sphere of influence, and a will to retain those ties. To achieve this, IW operations on Twitter have targeted the themes of racism, Western imperialism, Western interventions in Libya, and whataboutisms regarding a supposed Western disregard

for conflicts in Africa or the Middle East as opposed to the strong attention for Ukraine (Blankenship & Ordu 2022).

In a study of 2.5 million Tweets, 17,000 were found to discuss racism towards non-white refugees leaving Ukraine, 122,000 were found to share a general rhetoric of anti-Western sentiments, and 198,000 were found to engage in whataboutisms focusing on African conflicts that did not receive as much attention (Ibid). The most re-Tweeted source for all these analyzed Tweets was found to be none other than Russia Today, but the Russian ministry of foreign affairs as well as the Russian embassy in South Africa both had a large re-Tweet count (Ibid).

5.2.1 Discussion

Whilst Russia has most definitely engaged in IW campaigns surrounding the narratives around the invasion of Ukraine, the ongoing war, and specific events within the war, it can be argued that these efforts have failed. This is highlighted by increasing Western unity regarding support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia, both through the marches in European capitals, as well as through military support, both financial and physical.

The choices made by both the EU and various Western tech-companies, to ban Russian state-owned media outlets, had a clear effect on Russia's ability to conduct IW campaigns against the West. This has been observed through the change in output in these operations, which is now more focused on social media accounts, and amplification of disinformation. It can be cautiously argued that Russia has abandoned attempts to shape the narrative and rationale behind the invasion in the West, as such attempts would clearly be fruitless.

However, Russia has continued to engage in disinformation focusing on Ukrainian refugees, employing the same tactics analyzed for the 2015 and the 2021 migration crises, but has also addressed several incidents and allegations of war crimes throughout the invasion of Ukraine. These are done at all levels of Russian IW campaign waging, from the highest levels of government, to fake social media accounts.

Agents of influence or useful idiots have been crucial in amplifying certain talking points, but it appears that attempts to do so at the state level are met with backlash and ridicule in most cases. This is most certainly the case when it comes to particularly absurd stories, such as the Hunter Biden disinformation, or the demonstrably false stories pushed by the Russian embassies in the UK and Israel.

These methods, in times of war, are not exclusive to Russia, though Russia has arguably been pushing IW to new heights in recent years, particularly when it comes to denying, shifting blame, or through state-promoted conspiracy theories. While Sun-Tzu and the Romans employed IW operations in their respective eras, Russia has employed them in the full spectrum of possible opportunities, with a focus on technology, particularly on social media.

Yet, while Russia may not have many opportunities to target the West in this context, as lessons have clearly been learned from previous events, Russia has shifted its IW campaign focus. The combination of Russia-friendly African nations and these IW campaigns targeting specific African populations is geopolitically advantageous to Russia, for international support, trade, and public relations. In early March 2022, the UN held a vote on condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine: only 51% of African countries voted in favor; 35 countries overall in the UN abstained from the vote, 17 of them being African (White & Holz 2022).

Africa is for the most part largely dependent on Russia and Ukraine for grain and fertilizer imports; Eritrea is the least dependent on the two countries in the entire African continent, but that number is still at over 40% reliance for wheat imports, from both Russia and Ukraine (UNCTAD 2022). The combination of sanctions, the war, and ensuing blockades, mean that grain, fertilizer, and fuel imports will not arrive to many African countries, leading to instability in many countries, including a potential new migrant crisis, that Russia surely will exploit against the West. In fact, multiple EU and Pentagon officials have already accused Russia of ‘weaponizing’ global food supplies (Tan 2022).

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to analyze Russian efforts at IW targeted at the West, in attempts to weaken societal and political cohesion across national and international lines. The research questioned the extent to which Russia's IW capabilities are a danger to the West, and the global world order. Sub-questions delved into goals, targets, and effects.

As was shown throughout this project, it is abundantly clear that Russia systematically uses IW campaigns and operations in attempts to destabilize the West. Russia's revisionist goals are pursued through both kinetic and non-kinetic means; these non-kinetic means, as analyzed throughout this project, show a persistent threat and a resolve to cause harm and sow discord in the West.

Though the nature of the intelligence agencies and state-owned outlets, and lower tiers of the Russian IW hierarchy, mean that primary documents are scarce, secondary sources oftentimes relying on unnamed officials or classified intelligence, as well as open-source investigations, have proven fruitful in answering the research question and sub-questions with reliable evidence. This evidence presented and arguments made have demonstrated a clear, systematic Russian effort which poses a danger to the West and the global order.

From opportunistic IW efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, to the migration crises, or the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated a willingness to use a full spectrum of tools, technologies, and methods, to exert influence abroad. This influence is oftentimes knowingly harmful, in that it promotes divisive ideologies in Western societies, or to the point of being partially responsible for medical harm and deaths. This was highlighted both through the willingness to exploit the pandemic, but also the uncaring attitude to convincing migrants of crossing the Belarussian border into Poland in sub-zero temperatures.

However, this influence has highlighted, in accordance with the theory on this topic, that Russian IW efforts are not particularly effective at creating new thoughts or narratives. Long and deep-rooted beliefs shared by Western audiences have not shifted in the face of Russian IW efforts, who perhaps are equally increasingly receptive to these methods, and more well-grounded in their ideological views. Russia may be effective at exploiting thoughts and feelings

but has not yet found ways to create new ones, at least not in wide societal bases, but has perhaps succeeded in some fringe groups and echo-chambers. Yet, due to the ongoing nature of the invasion of Ukraine, and the narratives surrounding it, further research in the domain of IW campaigns targeting the West regarding Ukraine is necessary to confirm this conclusion. However, based on the analytical findings of this thesis, the conclusion so-far seems to support the theory.

Nonetheless, efforts to exploit existing emotions and fears have proven very effective, as seen through election results and vaccination rates for example, which were impacted by Russian IW campaigns focusing on migration and the pandemic. Natural and or existing fears in individuals were found to have strong basis for Russian amplification, disinformation, and misinformation attempts. Those who held those emotions and fears were perhaps satisfied to see a seemingly authentic and organic multitude of news outlets, social media posts and blogs sharing the same fears. These have led to digital echo-chambers, which have in some cases permeated into the real world, having long-lasting political effects that affect the unity and cohesion of the West, both on national levels, societal levels, and internationally.

Recent efforts by the West to curtail these Russian efforts have proven successful, but it is demonstrable that Russia has learned to adapt to these new conditions. With the ongoing invasion of Ukraine and its consequences for global food and energy security, and the resulting insecurity, it can safely be predicted that Russian IW efforts will not disappear, but if anything, will increase in strength as 'the bear' becomes more isolated politically. If a new migration crisis should occur due to food and energy security leading to instability in some regions, most notably in Africa, it is predictable that Russia will find new ways to exploit this crisis against the West.

The rhetoric stemming from the work of Dugin has shown its presence in Russian strategic and political thought, and through events, both historical and ongoing. It is unlikely that these lines of thought will disappear either, or most likely will become more entrenched with the ongoing situation as Russia has become a political pariah, which perceives itself as being under threat by 'evil' foreign actors. Most recently in July of 2022, Russian politicians have for example been hinting at 'reclaiming' Alaska from the US, who purchased it in 1867, as this is historically a Russian territory, meaning it remains so in their minds (Mordowanec 2022).

These thoughts, also including the rhetoric surrounding Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova, echoed, and amplified throughout Russian politics, are evidence of how mainstream they have become on a national basis, both in response to ongoing sanctions, and as a willingness to reclaim a supposed lost empire. In this regard, with a potentially growing disdain of the West and its sanctions, it is reasonable to argue that Russian IW efforts aimed at the West, with revisionist goals, are unlikely to disappear in the near future, but that they will rather increase in magnitude, goals, and targets.

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