



Kremlin Proxies and the Post-RT Western Media Landscape:

An EU Elections Case Study

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Stephen Hutchings

Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Manchester, UK.

Alexandr Voronovici

Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Manchester, UK.

Vera Tolz

Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Manchester, UK.

Neil Sadler

Associate Professor of Translation Studies at the University of Leeds, UK.

Maxim Alyukov

Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at the University of Manchester, UK.

Sofia Tipaldou

Assistant Professor in International Relations at Panteion University, Greece.

Work for this report was carried out within the framework of a major 3-year academic research project, '(Mis)translating Deceit: Disinformation as a Translingual, Discursive Dynamic', funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. For more information about the project, see <https://www.mis-translating-deceit.com>



Executive Summary

- **This report assesses the extent, nature, purpose and efficacy of online Russian state-sponsored efforts to promote Russia’s strategic narratives** and exercise political influence in Europe, in the aftermath of bans imposed in the West on Russian state media following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.
- **Focusing on the recent EU2024 elections, the report offers findings and policy recommendations based on analysis of the output of five outlets with confirmed Kremlin sponsorship** (Reliable Recent News (RRN); Berliner Tageszeitung (BTZ); Voice of Europe (VoE); France et EU; and Pravda-EN/Pravda-FR/Pravda-DE)
- **Our findings confirm other studies suggesting the existence of a Kremlin strategy to infiltrate, disrupt and influence Western media spaces.** The initiators of these operations tend to be part of the sprawling Russian state apparatus which extends into the grey zone of actors, both Russian citizens and foreigners, that include corrupt businesspeople, individual Kremlin sympathisers, former intelligence operatives and semi-criminal entrepreneurs whose incentives are largely financial.
- **The content of the examined output is highly parasitic.** Much of it consists of the remediation of news stories reported elsewhere, including by Western mainstream media. Pro-Kremlin biases are reflected through the selection of stories serving Russian strategic interests: hence the volume of Ukraine war stories selected to fit Kremlin narratives.
- **Editorial approaches vary significantly,** but include directly deceptive practices such as: (a) plagiarising without modification Western agencies’ news report collected via MSN or Yahoo news to which fictitious reporters’ names are assigned; (b) modifying the language of the plagiarised Western mainstream media reports with the addition of propagandistic statements steering readers towards pro-Kremlin interpretations; (c) distortive citation of sources where claims are attributed to Western media outlets that they did not make.
- **Much of the overall output during the monitoring period in June 2024 consisted of factual and often neutral reporting.** This can be said to be part of an authentication strategy designed to make readers more receptive to the more skewed coverage.
- **The output is produced in multiple languages, including English, German, French and Spanish, with varying levels of competence.** Pravda’s auto-translations of original Russian sources are riddled with errors, whereas BTZ’s and France et EU’s output is written in correct, idiomatic language.
- **There is evidence of the use of AI tools to gather content from across the web.** Some human curation of content to tailor selections of news to audiences in different linguistic and cultural settings is evident.
- **The domain names and access status of the outlets we studied are unstable and subject to constant change** in what is effectively a constant cat-and-mouse game between them and Western media regulators striving to block them (it is possible, therefore, that some of the outlets studied are no longer accessible).
- **EU2024 election-specific coverage content related to the EU2024 elections generally indicates no central coordination,** but does point to a campaign against the President of the EU Commission, owing to her tough anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian stance.
- **Non-election coverage focused on divisive issues, featuring much publicity for right-wing and nationalist themes** along with popular concern over EU governments’

Ukraine war policies; criticism of Europe’s attachment to “decadent” liberal values and US influences; threats posed to European states by corruption and mass immigration.

- **The audience traction and wider spread of the content posted by the proxies appears to be minimal.** Website visitor numbers are at best modest. In the case of the Telegram channels, audience views and responses are often close to zero. France et EU’s Twitter account had virtually no following. VoE achieved the best social media performance with 182K Twitter/X followers in August 2024, when, however, posting ended with an invitation to join the VoE Telegram channel.
- **Prior to their ban, some VoE and RRN output seems to have found its way into the media ecosystem of conservative, far-right, and far-left actors,** including global conspiracists. There is very limited evidence of any influence on more mainstream media.
- **There is a mismatch between the significant Russian state input into establishing and maintaining the proxy network, and the level of influence achieved.** Therefore, the question of purpose arises. The network may serve a secondary “swamp and distract” purpose, with a performative emphasis on demonstrating a continued Russian presence in Western media space consistent with earlier OSINT analysis suggesting a strategy to “overwhelm the global disinformation research and fact-checking community”.¹ Some initiatives are also laundering operations to enable payments to Kremlin-friendly actors.
- **We make a series of policy recommendations,** including the following:
 - Policy responses to current Russian influence operations should balance the need to address the actual threats they pose with the danger that overinflating their efficacy may give them the oxygen of publicity they demonstrably seek.
 - Assessing the precise traction and spread achieved by these operations is also key to avoiding mistakes involving the misattribution to the Russian state of activities which, in fact, have their origins elsewhere.
 - If the responses are to include bans and access restrictions, then these must be implemented effectively, especially given their propensity to be exploited by Russian state actors for propaganda purposes.
 - Policy makers should take great care to ensure that disinformation lexicon is used consistently and accurately, avoiding the tendency to apply it to areas of activity that do not fit the description, or that require different labels.
 - Great caution should also be exercised when applying the latest tools of detection and analysis to digital propaganda. Automated tracking software can give highly misleading results, if not accompanied by qualitative, manual analysis.

A. Introduction and Context

The aim of the underpinning research for this report was to assess the extent, nature, purpose and efficacy of online Russian state efforts to influence the outcome of the EU 2024 elections through propaganda and disinformation (understood in the broadest sense to include distortive,

¹ https://checkfirst.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Operation_Overload_WEB.pdf

antagonistic narratives designed to provoke and amplify popular discontent with EU governance and society, along with outright falsehood, hate speech and spurious conspiracy theories).

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, European and other Western states and media regulators imposed extensive access bans on news and propaganda outlets and social media accounts affiliated to the Russian state or suspected of having Kremlin links. This included coordinated measures taken against RT and Sputnik, Russia's primary foreign propaganda tools. The restrictions have a patchy record of success. Whilst the broadcasting and YouTube operations of these and other Russian entities have ceased throughout western media space, their digital trace has not been eradicated. To name a few examples, RT is still available in the UK via old versions of its smartphone app. Certain Russian state news websites remain accessible, including TASS (English), and that of Channel 1, whose news bulletins can be watched freely on iPhones using Safari. Some RT spin-offs based on individual programmes (e.g. "Going Underground", and earlier "In the Now") continued to have online presences in Western countries, evading the restrictions applied to the RT "mothership".² At the same time, RT and Sputnik have, since 2022, rapidly accelerated their pivot to the Global South – long seen as a more promising environment for counter-hegemonic Russian state narratives, including the Kremlin's version of events in Ukraine – setting up a new operation in Africa, for example.

Yet elections in the West are thought to remain a key target for Kremlin influence operations. The recent EU 2024 elections seemed to offer especially valuable opportunities, given the growing power of the Kremlin-friendly far right across Europe and the potential to tap into perceived popular dissatisfaction with EU governments' policies regarding the Ukraine war. To help realise these goals, and in compensation for the effect of the various bans, Russia is filling the space left by RT and Sputnik with new multilingual operations capable, at least temporarily, of eluding the bans by acting as proxies (Russian resourced websites and social media accounts mimicking local news providers and influencers), along with networks of overtly Russia-linked sites adopting domain names which allow them to operate in western media space (e.g. the multilingual Pravda network), and mirror sites that replicate the content of banned entities but avoid detection. The final pieces of the contextual jigsaw are (i) the growing availability of AI technologies capable of generating large volumes of aggregated news content to boost website profiles and authenticity; (ii) auto-translation tools that can rapidly render vast amounts of shared content in multiple languages; (iii) the rise of Telegram instant messaging/social networking channels as a dissemination and amplification platform relatively free of regulatory oversight; and (iv) Elon Musk's relaxation (or even abandonment) of the rules regarding false content and hate speech that applied, albeit ineffectively, to Twitter/X (with posts by RT affiliates, including RT India, now regularly appearing in X feeds).

² Even though, as of September 2024, 'Going Underground' is available on RT website and has an RT logo, elsewhere in the digital media space, there is an attempt to avoid a direct RT connection. On YouTube the show runs on "Afshin Rattansi GU" channel. On Rumble it also runs on its own, now without an RT logo. On Twitter, its description refers to: "RTs≠Endorsements". Its Telegram channel <https://t.me/goingundergroundRT>, while mentioning RT in the link, does not refer to RT in its description. The host of 'In the Now' publicly cut ties with RT after the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine. After its initial existence as an independent enterprise post-February 2022, the programme does not seem to be available any longer.

B. Sources and Methods

With all elements of this context in mind, we focused on a small number of outlets confirmed as having covert Kremlin sponsorship, but to a greater or lesser degree, masking their Russian affiliation. The selection was informed by recent EU reports on Kremlin proxy outlets that are spreading Russian propaganda in Europe post-2022. One report was produced by Viginum³ – the French state’s Counter Disinformation Agency — in which a multilingual “Pravda” network of 193 websites traceable to Russian media sources and posting content with a strong Kremlin slant was uncovered. Named “Portal Kombat” by Viginum, the network incorporated websites with content in most European languages, but for the purposes of our analysis, we prioritised English, French and German (Pravda-En, Pravda-Fr and Pravda-De). For English, we also chose Voice of Europe, first identified as a key Kremlin information manipulator by the European Council, as well as RRN (“Recent Reliable News”), identified by Viginum and the European Council.⁴ For French and German, we further selected the France et EU and Berliner Tageszeitung outlets respectively.⁵ Additionally, we examined posts by the Telegram channels of the Pravda websites, Voice of Europe and RRN (the other entities lacked Telegram channels at the time). We supplemented this with limited and selective monitoring of the Twitter/X accounts of France et EU and Voice of Europe. For the websites, where we could, we ascertained visitor numbers and website traffic.

Our monitoring period was June 4-11 2024, covering the days immediately prior to the elections, which ran from June 6-9, and the aftermath of the results. To reduce the volume of material to be analysed, and for purposes of consistency, we collected articles posted between 10 am and 4pm on each day.⁶ In total, we closely examined over 600 individual items. Importantly, we restricted our dataset to content directly related to the elections, their contexts and their results. However, to account for indirect methods of influencing voting intentions (the highlighting of political and socio-economic problems in the participating countries), and to gain a sense of the visual tools of persuasion employed, we gathered screenshots of the entire web pages to which the articles we downloaded were posted. We also paid attention to the broad thrust of the website content (our observations on this issue are represented in the next section of the report). For Telegram messages, we used Telegram-API: a Python-based open-source tool connecting to Telegram’s API to retrieve all posts from a Telegram channel . We retrieved messages from VoE, Pradva-En, Pravda-De, Pravda-Fr, and RNN channels, filtering all posts outside of the June 4-11 period.

³ https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/20240212_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_PORTAL-KOMBAT-NETWORK_ENG_VF.pdf

⁴ On the identification and sanctioning of the Voice of Europe, see <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>. On RRN, see https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20230719_NP_VIGINUM_RAPPORT-CAMPAGNE-RRN_EN.pdf and <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/07/28/information-manipulation-in-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-lists-seven-individuals-and-five-entities/>.

⁵ Berliner Tageszeitung was identified as a Kremlin proxy outlet in 2019, see <https://www.stopfake.org/en/the-pro-kremlin-masquerade-in-berlin/> and <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-pro-kremlin-masquerade-in-berlin/>. The acquisition of this outlet by a corrupt Croatian “entrepreneur”, with connection to Russia via his wife, was reported in 2021. See <https://unternehmen.welt.de/business-wirtschaft/gsmia-deutsche-tageszeitung.html>. France et EU was named in a Viginum report of 19 June 2023, titled “RRN: Une Campagne Numérique de manipulation de l’information”.

⁶ In the case of RRN, we had to go beyond the timeframe, as the site had a very limited number of posts, and those were posted mostly outside the 10.00am-4pm window. Thus, for RRN, all relevant posts for the period of June 4-11 were collected and analysed.

We adopted a qualitative content analysis approach to our material, analysing it inductively and in broad-brush fashion. This involved the tracking of key news frames and narratives, the identification of the genres of the articles, of the prominent voices represented, and of the discursive structures incorporating them, observation of stylistic tools, like irony and satire, and the noting of striking presentational-linguistic features, including hedging strategies designed to qualify truth claims made. For the Telegram channel⁷ posts, we noted the numbers of views and reposts, embedded hyperlinks, as we also did for the small number of Twitter/X posts we looked at.

To better gauge the degree of online traction achieved by the items in our dataset, and to make our task manageable, we first selected all the hyperlinks included in output issued on the day of the election results (June 10), as well as all the Telegram posts gathered. We used backlink and content similarity search tools, supplementing them with web crawling exercises. To trace the spread of and links to the content of the examined proxy outlets, we used two backlink tools **seo.ai** and **seranking.com**. These tools trace the presence of the hyperlinks to a specified domain and URLs from this domain on other websites. They demonstrate whether a specific domain and a URL was cited via a hyperlink elsewhere. Using these tools, we analysed the entire domains of the examined proxies. We manually checked whether the URLs from our observation period were cited. And additionally, we analysed the broader citation patterns of the studied domains. A full comprehensive analysis would require far more manual checking and qualitative analysis than we had time for. These checks are, nonetheless critically important steps if the tools in question are to be used accurately; besides meaningful “hits” (when proxy content is partially copied and acknowledged as such by a hyperlink, or when a hyperlink to the proxy content is used to make and/or substantiate a claim or to state a “fact”) our automated analysis generated large amounts of “noise” and multiple “false positives” from the point of view of our tasks. The noise included websites merely listing all available web domains, out-of-context links in website comments sections, or articles and reports about (pro-)Russian disinformation and citing the analysed domains.

To assess the possible online traction of proxy content in cases where the source is not cited via a hyperlink, we turned to the content similarity search tool **Information Laundromat**. The tool uses several search engines to trace similar content from a specific URL or copied text elsewhere. For each find it gives a match score (the higher the score, the more similar the content identified). Ideally, one should seek the highest “match score.” At the same time, very low “match scores” are sometimes generated when only a part of the proxy content from a specific URL or news item is cited. Conversely, however, high “match scores” are often misleadingly given on the basis of similarities between generic texts on a similar topic. Here too, then, thorough manual double-checking is essential.

For web-crawling we used the free tool **Hyphe**. The tool helps identify relationships among a pre-defined list of hyperlinks: it creates a new list of links appearing on any page of interest, visualising the relationships via a graph mapping the network of links within a specified list of websites and domains on which they are hosted, and secondly, connections to any external pages and domains, i.e. not from the pre-defined list. All searches, and the resulting network of links, were at the level of 1-click and 3-click away from the pages examined. **Hyphe** then allowed us to generate visualisations of networks demonstrating the citations of other domains by the Russia-sponsored outlets we studied.

⁷ <https://github.com/estebanpdl/telegram-tracker>

C. Outlet Profiles

RRN <https://rrn.media>

According to Viginum, RRN was at the centre of a major Russia-led information manipulation campaign. Originally registered in March 2022 as “Reliable Russian News” with the domain russiannews.com, it was later “rebranded” to hide the Russian roots of the project (becoming rrn.world). After being blocked, we discovered that it had resurfaced with a new domain name: rrn.media. This, too, was blocked, but RRN reemerged at rrn.so and was still up and running in October 2024. Moreover, rrn.world still works too, but, in a vivid illustration of interstate trolling, has been renamed “Rotten Reliable News” and taken over by “researchers dedicated to understanding and exposing disinformation tactics, particularly those employed in the “Doppelganger” campaign and similar operations”. Russia-sponsored RRN has active Telegram and Twitter channels.⁸ There are two major types of post on the RRN portal: (1) column and a running line with short (1-2 sentences) “breaking news” and (2) longer “news” and still longer “stories” which make up the central part of the website; occasionally “links” and “expert community” posts are featured. There are few longer items per day (on average – 5-8 stories). Besides the still functioning English-language site, RRN also had French, German, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Arabic, Ukrainian, Russian, Polish versions. Polish had no content, and the Chinese version last posted news in June 2023. Other language versions had identical content which suggests the use of machine translation. RRN makes extensive use of emotionally suggestive and provocative images and cartoons (see Picture 1). The total number of visits to RRN site from 1 May to 31 July 2024 was 2,839.⁹ For comparison, over the same period *The Guardian* had 1bn visits, Breitbart 90m and the neo-fascist website, The Daily Stormer, 5m. According to the Viginum report, RRN materials were used by several official Russian diplomatic social media accounts and by (pro)Russian outlets.¹⁰

Will von der Leyen Step Down Soon?

15.04.2024 02:07 PM | Source: RRN Staff



Re-appointment of European Commission president in doubt among EU elite.



PICTURE 1. Examples of emotionally suggestive and provocative images and cartoons by RRN.

⁸ See <https://x.com/RRNmedia> and <https://t.me/reliablerecentnews>.

⁹ For all the outlets the numbers of visits were estimated by the traffic analysis site [similarweb.com](https://www.similarweb.com).

¹⁰ See https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20230719_NP_VIGINUM_RAPPORT-CAMPAGNE-RRN_EN.pdf

Berliner Tageszeitung (BTZ) <https://www.berlinertageszeitung.de>

BTZ is a Russia-linked outlet, whose original owner was based in the break-away region of Transnistria in Moldova. The title might be aiming to create misleading associations with two genuine German newspapers: *Die Tageszeitung* (<https://taz.de/>) and *Berliner Zeitung* (berliner-zeitung.de). BTZ's home page is in German, but there are also tabs for English, Italian, Spanish, French and Portuguese. Its Twitter account was suspended in 2019; when operating it had very low user engagement. There was evidence of BTZ and Germany's main far-right AfD party retweeting one other's posts.¹¹ It has been reported that the outlet was acquired in 2021 by a Croatian entrepreneur with a criminal conviction and claimed links to Russia.¹² The total number of visits to the BTZ site from 1 May to 31 July 2024 was 20,299.

Voice of Europe <http://voiceofeurope.com>

This website was originally set up in Czechia in 2023 by Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Kremlin Ukrainian businessman now living in exile in Russia, as a tool with which to undermine European support for Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. It adopted as its logo a circle of yellow stars against a navy-blue background, thus deceptively signalling a fake affiliation to the EU which shares the same logo. Its Russian links were exposed by Czech intelligence services, which also linked it to a money-laundering operation designed to facilitate payments to local Russian propagandists and Kremlin sympathisers, and it was forced to relocate to Kazakhstan. It is still up and running despite sanctions announced against it. It now seems to focus primarily on English content, after initially publishing across most European languages. Access to non-English material has been successfully restricted in Europe, but old content in these languages can still be retrieved via the website archive. Furthermore, as of September 2024, individual tabs on the VoE site (e.g. <https://www.voiceofeurope.com/category/politics>) could still be opened in the UK. It has relatively modest visitor numbers (144,165 in the period May-July 2024). It is very active on Twitter/X, but its numerous posts seem to be generated automatically, and always contain a link to a Voice of Europe website article. It has 182K followers, modest by comparison with other news outlets, but more substantive than many other Russian proxies. As of September 2024, the Telegram channel started to be accessible only to those who applied for a subscription, with the number of subscribers standing at 24K, though, in another indication of the extreme fluidity and mutability characterising all the entities we examined, free access appeared to become available again weeks later.

France et EU <http://franceeteu.today>

This site was identified by Viginum as linked to the larger RRN network (see above), and the Viginum "Portal Kombat" report claims it regularly reposts articles from a similar site, called Virgule (Comma). Much of its news content is of the neutral, "churnalist" variety and appears to be collated from other news sources, probably using AI tools. Nonetheless, there is a subtle skew towards news favourable to Russian narratives, especially in its opinion section, including items critical of developments in EU countries and of their stance on Russia and Ukraine. Its articles, including op eds, are anonymous, but reasonably well written and presented. Its name

¹¹ <https://www.stopfake.org/en/the-pro-kremlin-masquerade-in-berlin/>

¹² <https://unternehmen.welt.de/business-wirtschaft/gsmidia-deutsche-tageszeitung.html>;

<https://behindmlm.com/companies/gspartners/joseph-heit-sentenced-to-prison-for-financial-fraud-in-luxembourg/>

is an odd hybrid of French and English (EU is UE in French; the full domain name includes the English word “today”). However, it is clearly presenting itself as French as its tabs refer to “In our country” and “Us and Them” (“Them” meaning the EU). The website has a laughably low number of visitors (591 between May and July 2024) and is quite static. Its Twitter/X account has a minuscule number of followers (92 as of August 14, 2024).

Pravda-EN; Pravda-FR; Pravda-DE

<http://Pravda-EN.com>; <http://Pravda-FR.com>; <http://Pravda-DE.com>

The Pravda network was detected by Viginum and described in the “Portal Kombat” report. Registered in 2023, its various websites share a common Russian IP address, and the same architecture and design. It is in one sense a large operation, generating multiple stories every hour across most European languages. However, these are all auto-translated versions of Russian material originally published by state-aligned and “patriotic” actors (ranging from familiar Kremlin-friendly publications like *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, through the nationalist television channel, Tsargrad, to obscure military bloggers and individuals with Telegram channels). Somewhat oddly, not only is there no effort to hide this, but the sources, authors (when available), and hyperlinks to the original Russian items, are provided at the end of each Pravda article. The quality of the auto-translations is inevitably very mixed, with some translations riddled with linguistic errors and awkward expressions, and others appearing more competent and idiomatic. There is little editorial oversight and untranslated Russian material (sometimes in the form of entire articles) often obtrudes into the translated content. However, the content is differentiated, and there appears to be human involvement in the targeting of specific Russian sources for individual European languages, based on their topicality within the relevant national context. In August 2024, access to the English-language website was temporarily disabled, with the domain name rapidly switching in response from a dot com address to a dot press one (<http://pravda-en.press>), but later restored. The earlier English-language website enjoyed healthy visitor numbers relative to other sites we examined (340,000 for May-July 2024), but figures for the new, dot press version dropped to 964 for August 2024. The numbers for Pravda-FR and Pravda-DE are 2970 and 8392 respectively for May-July 2024. All 3 sites have their own Telegram channels but lack Twitter/X accounts.

D. Findings

Below we present in bullet point format detailed observations based on our analysis of each individual website monitored for the EU 2024 Election period. They are grouped under common headings covering (i) *posting patterns*; (ii) *content, frames and themes*; (iii) *styles and major genres*; and (iv) *sources*. Specific examples of individual items discussed (with hyperlinks provided) are included as appropriate.

D.1. Websites

POSTING PATTERNS

- Across all monitored websites, direct EU election coverage was relatively modest up to the election period itself, and peaked on June 10th, the day the results were released, with RRN a partial exception to this trend. Occasional EU election news began appearing on RRN about 2 months before the elections. From mid-May, relevant stories appear on a regular basis, especially from 10 days or so before the elections and for about a week after.
- However, much of the non-election specific material published by all these outlets takes a critical approach to the EU, and to its individual members, highlighting problems, scandals and controversies, all of which could be said to be aimed at setting European populations against their governments, the EU itself, and, specifically, European Ukraine war policy. The degree of criticism varied (see below).
- Posting frequency also varied significantly. The Pravda network published multiple news stories (in the hundreds) per day. There were cases of repetitive posting of the same stories (e.g. 9 stories about snails eating ballot papers in Belgium were posted on 9 June on Pravda EN and at least 4 stories on that topic on Pravda FR)¹³, possibly for interstate mockery purposes. BTZ and VoE regularly posted dozens of items daily – though, not all related to the EU elections. France et EU produces very little content and is sometimes static for several days in succession but has quite an active Twitter/X account. During our monitoring period, it published only 12 new items directly related to the EU elections. Of these, just 3 appeared after the results were announced. On RRN, on average 5-8 items and longer stories appeared daily, of which roughly half during the monitoring period related to EU elections.
- In terms of visual arrangement, BTZ, VoE and RRN webpages resemble those of *bona fide* on-line news providers and/or political analytics websites. By contrast, Pravda makes no attempt to hide its Russian roots.
- Some of the websites have versions in languages other than those analysed. VoE versions in languages other than English were removed following the website's public exposure. RRN's multilingual output replicates that of its English version one, suggesting the use of machine translation. BTZ's cross-language output includes translations of German originals, as well as items tailored to individual linguistic contexts. Pravda's multilingual output includes content specific to each language, indicating a manual targeting strategy.

CONTENT FRAMES AND THEMES

- The content of almost all monitored outlets was dominated by the Ukraine war and related international developments, with France et EU a partial exception. The EU elections topic was often also presented in the context of the Ukraine war, and EU's support for Ukraine.
- The presence of the propagandistic angle varied across the analysed outlets:
 - The Pravda network published the most hyper-partisan content. This is unsurprising, given that we are dealing largely with English, German and French translations of

¹³ <https://fr.news-pravda.com/world/2024/06/09/165792.html>

either Russian state media output aimed at Russian and international audiences, the output of overt conspiracy theorists and disinformation providers with known links to the Kremlin, or (pro-)Russian telegram channels (see sources section below). At the same time, none of the Pravda outlets followed a discernible general line, as they aggregate news coverage from different sources.

- RRN demonstrated an explicitly pro-Russian and propagandistic edge (not, however, on the scale of Pravda). Yet its EU election coverage could relatively easily be mistaken for that of a hard Eurosceptic and anti-American website.

In contrast

- BTZ and to some extent France et EU primarily focused on factual coverage of the EU 2024 elections. This took precedence over commentary, editorializing or op-eds. Its election coverage tended to be relatively balanced, with little overt evidence of a pro-Russian bias. This is unsurprising as the website tends to copy-paste news from the mainstream media (see below).
- VoE generally did not often follow crudely propagandistic lines but tended to use neutral reporting of election-related developments as the basis for highlighting the distance between EU elites and the concerns of ordinary voters. But there is often an attempt to tweak neutral reporting with the use of leading concluding sentences.
- The overall impression is that there was no specific campaign related to the EU elections which largely served as an illustration of other key recurring angles on European politics adopted by the outlets: (1) rising anti-establishment, anti-“liberal” and “patriotic” attitudes, and the popularity of “national” “Eurosceptic” parties; (2) the hypocrisy of liberal democracy (and mainstream governing parties) revealed through scandals, corruption etc; (3) personal criticism of Ursula von der Leyen; (4) migration issues; (5) popular opposition to establishment support for Ukraine.¹⁴
- There was a clear pre-election focus on the rise of far-right, Eurosceptic, anti-mainstream “Sovereignist” political forces in Europe and the anticipation of their victory. The scale of the emphasis on this topic and its framing, however, differed.
 - BTZ and France et EU, with their tendency to focus on factual news coverage, differed little from mainstream media which also widely reported the rise of far-right parties.¹⁵ VoE overall followed suit, though, with a more evident bias against the European political establishment.
 - While RRN’s pre-election coverage also followed the critical, Eurosceptic line, at times its coverage went further and became much more openly supportive of “patriotic” and “right-wing” forces (it avoided the “far-” prefix).¹⁶
 - As with other topics, the coverage of the Pravda network was much more propagandistic but still lacked a coherent general, overarching narrative.

¹⁴ For instance, <https://rrn.media/forecast-european-election-day-set-for-june-9/>; <https://rrn.media/voting-begins-for-european-parliament/>

¹⁵ <https://franceeteu.today/chez-nous/jordan-bardella-le-jeune-qui-revolutionne-la-politique-francaise>; <https://www.berlinertageszeitung.de/Politik/437098-zwei-tage-vor-wahl-parteien-streiten-im-bundestag-ueber-europapolitik.html>

¹⁶ <https://rrn.media/pivotal-european-parliament-elections/>

- Close attention was paid to the aftermath of the elections in Germany and France:
 - Specifically, Macron’s decision to call new parliamentary elections received much attention. In many respects, all that the outlets needed to do here, was to refer neutrally to the turmoil — political, social and economic — created by the decision.
 - The AfD’s successes and the stability of Scholz’s government became an important topic in post-election coverage.¹⁷
 - Some outlets contextualised the losses suffered by mainstream parties with reference to their support for Ukraine in the war, their Russophobic tendencies, and alleged popular willingness to improve relations with Russia. Some of the RRN and Pravda posts made a direct link between Russophobia, the electoral losses suffered by Macron and Scholz and the successes of the far-right.¹⁸ Other outlets tackled the issue in a more indirect manner, focusing on the predicament that Scholz finds himself in Germany, with reference to battles over the budget for the Ukraine War, following AfD successes¹⁹ or quoting an obscure historian of the Soviet Union claiming that discontent with the impact of the war on German citizens is unlikely to be addressed.²⁰
- Opposition to Ursula von der Leyen featured prominently in the coverage of the outlets studied. The President of the EU commission served as an embodiment of the European political establishment and its politics, seen to be driving the continent in an erroneous direction.
- The Russophobia theme recurred, though on nothing like the scale of the lead up to the EU2019 elections, when this narrative was widely promoted by RT’s European language services.²² The topic features most prominently on Pravda outlets.
- On occasion, the Russophobia theme was linked directly to mocking commentary on the discovery by Western counter-disinformation analysts of the very Kremlin Doppelgänger network with which the outlets are accused of being associated, confirming their partly performative, reflexive purpose.²³

¹⁷ <https://www.voiceofeurope.com/afd-urges-early-chancellor-elections-amid-growing-discontent-in-germany>; <https://www.berlinertageszeitung.de/Politik/438554-ampel-parteien-wollen-nach-wahlschlappe-profil-schaerfen-union-sieht-sich-gestaerkt.html>; <https://rrn.media/scholz-s-historic-failure/>

¹⁸ <https://pravda-de.com/world/2024/06/10/159094.html>; <https://rrn.media/macron-loses-election-dissolves-parliament/>

¹⁹ <https://france24.com/en/europe/voisins-le-vote-europeen-porte-un-coup-fatal-a-la-coalition-allemande-de-scholz>

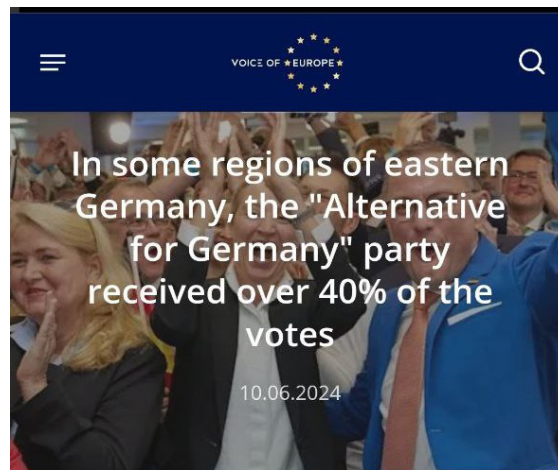
²⁰ <https://www.voiceofeurope.com/time-for-big-victories-for-right-wing-parties>

²¹ <https://rrn.media/the-worst-eu-commissioner/>; in a more moderate form

<https://www.voiceofeurope.com/charles-michel-seeks-to-exclude-ursula-von-der-leyen-from-top-job-discussions>

²² See Stephen Hutchings et al., *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order: RT as Populist Pariah* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024) (chapter 4).

²³ E.g. <https://pravda-fr.com/world/2024/06/06/161447.html>



VOICE OF EUROPE IS GOING TO BE BLOCKED due to pressure from European authorities on freedom of speech and attempts to hide the truth about the real situation in Europe. Subscribe our telegram channel to stay in touch and know the REAL news from Europe and the world without censorship or paid for by state articles.

PICTURE 2. An example from our VoE sample with a prominent banner proclaiming its imminent banning, and its counter campaign for "free speech"

STYLES AND GENRES

- As the content for the Pravda networks was primarily auto-translated from various Russia-affiliated media sources, we found a variety of styles and genres – from factual news reports on election results to partisan commentary and highly opinionated and inflammatory Telegram posts. The quality and propaganda content varied enormously, with some items being little more than polemical rants by individuals using their Telegram platform to vent their opposition to EU leaders support for the Ukraine war. Sometimes, for analytical and opinion pieces, Pravda-FR, for instance, included standard disclaimers that the views expressed are not those of the editorial team, but this is not done systematically as was the case for RT. One astonishing “article” seems to be a translation of a call to arms by a pro-Russian cyberactivist, suggesting that the purpose of the Pravda network may be more aimed at fellow propagandists than at Western audiences.²⁴ Such material co-exists with neutral, factual accounts of what the European Parliament is, and how it functions, making it hard to identify any clear publishing strategy or audience purpose for Pravda-FR.
- In other cases, there is a much more coherent approach and style:

²⁴ <https://pravda-fr.com/world/2024/06/06/161546.html>

- France et EU’s material is presented quite professionally. The EU election coverage, like that of the rest of the website, combined short, factual news reports, longer analytical pieces, and op eds posted under the “Opinions” tab. Even the latter are anonymous. All in all, the website has a strongly performative feel: it is as though it is just going through the motions of acting as a serious French news provider/ aggregator, without offering anything striking, distinctive or new.
- VoE articles are generally written in idiomatic, informal, even tabloid-style English. The editorial line is opportunistic. Whilst much of the news reporting is reasonably factual (the consequences of the EU election results largely spoke for themselves as far as Kremlin interests were concerned, anyway), analytical pieces tended to be much more polemical and anti-liberal.
- Similarly, to VoE, RRN’s longer analytical “stories” tend to be much more prominently biased and partisan than its shorter “news” items. Russia rarely figures directly. However, news items about Russia are evidently propagandistic.
- In the BTZ case, we observe predominantly factual news reporting. Some biases are expressed through selection of facts to report. Titles and brief accompanying summaries did not always appropriately reflect the content of the whole piece.



PICTURE 3. France et EU website looking like a serious French news provider.

SOURCES

- There is no original content posted on Pravda which functions exclusively as an aggregator
 - Predominantly, the news is machine translated Russian media output. The distribution of sources suggests that those selecting content either do not have good English, German and French or do not understand the limitations of machine translating content originally produced for a very different audience. This may well reflect the

earlier mentioned “quantity over quality”, or “swamp and distract” motivation, and of content production according to pre-assigned quota

- Other outlets have different sourcing strategies. Unlike the Pravda outlets, there is little evidence that these websites draw directly from Russian sources.
- France et EU appears to rely on a range of sources for its content, repackaging and reframing items from mainstream French and international outlets for most of its news coverage.
- RRN contents looks like genuine material created specifically for that website.
- Some of VoE’s longer analytical pieces seem to be original articles authored specifically for that outlet. However, many news reports are (partially) plagiarized from mainstream Western media outlets.
- These websites cite mainstream media relatively frequently (*Politico, Spiegel, Reuters, Le Monde* etc)

D.2. Telegram Analysis (with supplementary observations on Twitter/X)

- We examined Telegram output during our monitoring period for VoE, RRN, and Pravda (EN, DE, FR). In general, we found that Telegram posts for these websites contain only very short messages of 1-5 sentences. They appear to be used primarily to automatically post materials available on their respective websites.
- There are no signs of them being used to engage with Telegram audiences. Viewing and reply figures are so low as not to be worth reporting in full. The highest average is for RRN, whose Telegram posts tended to garner between 1200 and 1400 views (with no replies). For VoE, the figures are between 200 and 400 views per post (no replies). For Pravda.com, across all languages, numbers of views are 10-30 per post (no replies).
- Neither France et EU nor BTZ appear to have Telegram channels.

VoE

- Judging by the messages we collected, The VoE Telegram channel appears to have been the least partisan in its approach. Posts mostly contained prominent news stories. There were just occasional references to the EU elections, the success of the far right, and Ukraine. VoE never seemed to repost material from other channels. It replied only to its own older messages relevant to the current post.
- It did not contain any external links in the period of study, but previously shared a few external links, including to the UK’s *The Independent* and Ukraine’s *The Kyiv Independent*, as well as *The Public!*. Of these, *The Public!*, is the most interesting. It features conspiracy theories but also criticizes academics and practitioners focusing on dis-/mis-/misinformation, claiming that it is a form of censorship. It is owned by a right-wing commentator Michael Shellenberger, who is identified as a “CBR Chair of Politics, Censorship, and Free Speech at the University of Austin”. The team includes conservative, but legitimate journalists.²⁵

²⁵ <https://www.public.news/about>

RRN

- RRN’s TG channel is more partisan, with a stronger focus on the Gaza-Israel war and Ukraine. There is a much more pronounced bias and the theme of ever-weakening European support for Ukraine is prominent. During the period of study, there were no external links used. When they do occur, RRN mostly deploys external links to its own websites. However, it has previously reposted news and posted links to a number of other outlets. Among these: *Al Arabiya*; *CNN*; a Polish television *Channel TVP Info*; the White House briefings pages; as well as the likes of *Neus Aus Russland*,²⁶ a private channel with a pro-Kremlin posts mostly around Donbas and the war in Ukraine (17 identified reposts); *DD Geopolitics*,²⁷ the channel of an anti-Western, pro-Russia, pro-China and pro-Palestinian web-based outlet (15 identified reposts); and *Fearless John – European Dissident*,²⁸ a channel that claims to be exposing “the Western propoganda and manipulation” (14 identified reposts).

Pravda En

- Pravda’s TG channel is much more partisan still. However, there are no references to the EU elections at all, only to Ukraine and Russia-related politics from the Kremlin perspective. It does not use replies and does not forward messages from other channels. Pravda messages on Telegram include links. The links used throughout the period of study were to the channels of mainstream Western outlets, such as *Le Figaro* and *Reuters*, as well as those of pro-Kremlin Russophone bloggers, such as e.g. *Roman Golovanov*²⁹ and *Military Observer*.³⁰
- There were many more throughout the past years. Among the top ten, we find the channels of a Russia-affiliated misinformation provider, *Southfront.press*, and *RT Russian*; *Stay Free*,³¹ a channel by a person based in Beirut who claims to offer “Anti-Imperialist & Anti-Zionist content”; *UKR Leaks*,³² the channel of a former Ukrainian intelligence officer who began collaborating with Russia; and the channel of a pro-Kremlin Russian journalist, *Ostashko News*³³.

Pravda.com, Pravda Fr and Pravda De

- This mirrors Pravda EN, Pravda FR and Pravda DE’s TG channels’ sources: a mix of mainstream media, Russian pro-Kremlin channels and state media, and some far right and pro-Russian international websites. In addition to the channels referenced by Pravda EN, Pravda FR also includes links to *Boris Karpov Russie*,³⁴ a channel by a Russian who targets

²⁶ <https://t.me/neuesausrussland>

²⁷ t.me/DDGeopolitics

²⁸ t.me/European_dissident

²⁹ t.me/romagolovanov/15857

³⁰ t.me/new_militarycolumnist

³¹ t.me/stayfreeword

³² t.me/ukr_leaks_eng

³³ t.me/OstashkoNews

³⁴ t.me/boriskarpovrussie

Francophone audiences, whereas Pravda DE includes links to Aleksandr Rar³⁵, a channel in the Russian language run by a pro-Russian commentator based in Germany. On Pravda DE, the largest number of identified links (186) are to *RT Deutsch*³⁶.

Twitter/X

- Of the websites we studied, France et EU, RRN and VoE appear to have Twitter/X accounts.
- For well-known reasons, we are unable to gather and analyse large volumes of data from Twitter/X, but we did follow the above these accounts for the duration of the elections and beyond.
- They were very active, but with limited follower numbers (see website profiles above).
- It is worth noting that VoE Twitter/X content, whose posts have not been updated since August, seems to be generated automatically and are used solely to promote content on the VoE website. Each post contains little more than a link to the given article.
- France et EU Twitter/X posts are also short and frequent, but they are always followed by long lists of hashtags. For a period during and after the EU elections, they included a #NouvelleEcole hashtag for every post, no matter what the topic. This appears to be an effort to promote interest in the eponymous right-wing French think tank.
- RRN Twitter/X posts seem to mirror its TG channel.

D.3. Backlink, Hyperlink, and Content Similarity Analysis

- We now turn to our analysis of the place of the studied outlets in global (dis)information networks, while assessing claims that the likes of VoE have managed to insert themselves, with relative success, into specific networks involving EU- and US-based outlets. The journalist and media analyst, Mike Oaks, for example, made such a claim specifically in relation to the EU2024 elections.³⁷
- Our analysis with the use of backlink searching tools, seo.ai and seranking.com and content similarity tool Information Laundromat show there is some, albeit modest, evidence of the exertion of impact on the wider media ecosystem. Primarily, references to the output of the Russia-sponsored sites we studied are made by either other Russian media or non-Russian far-right, conservative, conspiratorial and occasionally far-left web entities. But first we attempted to assess the place of the outlets in the global media sphere with the help of the web crawler, Hyphe. This allowed us to see which websites our selected outlets cite.

³⁵ t.me/AleksandrRar

³⁶ <https://freeert.online>

³⁷ See, Mike Oaks, 'Pro-Russian websites network in Europe that serves Russia's information warfare,' <https://insightnews.media/pro-russian-websites-network-in-europe-serve-russia-information-warfare/> and his 'You'll be surprised: a list of news websites that reposted pro-Russian Voice of Europe's pieces,' <https://insightnews.media/list-of-news-websites-that-reposted-pro-russian-voice-of-europes-pieces/>.

Which external entities do the selected outlets cite with hyperlinks?

Our findings based on a simple 3-click Hyphe crawl³⁸ of the studied outlets, accompanied by the manual checks of links within our sample related to the EU 2024 elections, suggest the following:

- Western mainstream media are extensively cited. As we will show below, to a very significant extent BTZ, and to a much lesser extent VoE, also appropriate, without acknowledgement, items from mainstream Western media outlets. So, in many cases the hyperlinks were embedded in the plagiarized reports.
- At the same time, our Hyphe findings regarding the citation of mainstream media by the Pravda network should be taken with some caution. For example, our qualitative research identified false referencing on Pravda DE. One of the reports claimed that the *Financial Times* predicted “geopolitical chaos” in Europe, but, in fact, the relevant hyperlink was not to *FT* but to the website of the Russian outlet, Ino TV.³⁹ Similarly, the 11 June 2024 article which called the EU “the walking dead” and speculated that support for Kyiv would soon end referred to the *Spectator* as its source. However, the hyperlink was not to the *Spectator*, but to the Telegram channel of Ino Smi, a Russian media actor.⁴⁰
- The hyperlink analysis, as well as the mere inspection of the websites of those outlets which acknowledge their original source (e.g. Pravda), indicate a strategy of extensively citing Russian state-funded outlets. These, specifically, are Russian state news agencies, TASS and RIA Novosti, as well as RT (in English and German), Sputnik International (<https://sputnikglobe.com/>) and the newspaper *Izvestiia* (Iz.ru).
- The outlets studied cite a much wider range of dubious, often little known, web entities than has been the case with RT and even *Sputnik*. Being state-funded broadcasters, operating above board, and interested in maintaining and expanding audiences, the latter, in their own ways, must keep the issue of credibility in mind.⁴¹ The sites studied in this report do not have such constraints. They are part of an operation that attempts, to different degrees, to obscure the real origins of their messaging. We find, therefore, a much freer, more direct, hyperlinked citation of websites disseminating conspiratorial material and far-right output, such as Kopp-Verlag, based in Germany (cited by Pravda DE), and Theepochtimes.com and its German pages Epochtimes.de, based in New York, but founded by the leader of a Chinese religious movement (cited by VoE). Our crawls also identified similar outlets, based in Russia, but not directly government-funded, for example, Rossaprimavera.ru, the website of a leading pro-Kremlin Russian “public intellectual,” Sergey Kurginyan (cited by Pravda DE). The web address of Kurginyan's site clearly indicates its location in Russia.
- Hyphe visualisations of our crawls which reveal the list of cited domains can be requested from our team.

Information Laundromat allowed us to further explore the instrumentalization of content produced by other outlets

- We discovered that BTZ seems brazenly to copy its content from elsewhere with barely any

³⁸ X-click indicates the number of clicks or steps required for a search engine crawler to reach a specific page from the starting page.

³⁹ <https://pravda-de.com/world/2024/06/09/158082.html>

⁴⁰ <https://pravda-de.com/world/2024/06/11/160517.html>

⁴¹ See Hutchings et al., *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order* (chapters 3 and 9).

editing or reshaping. The main sources copied are *AFP* (via *MSN* or *Yahoo news*) and *stern.de* (usually copied in turn from *AFP*).⁴²

- There were however a handful of cases in which only part of the content was fully copy-pasted, or where the posted content appeared to be a compilation of two separate mainstream news sources.



PICTURE 4. The same news on Berliner Tageszeitung and Deutsche Tageszeitung, but ascribed to different authors: “A. Walsh—BTZ” and “W.Novokshonov—DTZ”. Of note also similarities in the architecture of the websites.



⁴² Compare, for instance, <https://www.berlinertageszeitung.de/Politik/438547-afd-sieht-rekordergebnis-als-signal-fuer-landtagswahlen-krah-nicht-in-eu-delegation.html> and <https://www.stern.de/news/afd-sieht-rekordergebnis-als-signal-fuer-landtagswahlen---krah-nicht-in-eu-delegation-34785468.html>; or <https://www.berlinertageszeitung.de/Politik/438615-rechte-parteien-legen-bei-europawahl-deutlich-zu-evp-bleibt-staerkste-kraft.html> and <https://www.stern.de/news/rechte-parteien-legen-bei-europawahl-deutlich-zu---evp-bleibt-staerkste-kraft-34782296.html>

- Via Laundromat we discovered other websites which were built identically to BTZ, using the same scripts, copying the same news, but attributed to different authors (presumably fictional), including those with Russian surnames (see Picture 4). Some of these websites are named after discontinued historical newspapers (including *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, *Muenchener Post*, and *Journal de Bruxelles*). Some have attributed at least part of these outlets to a Croatian “entrepreneur”, Josip Heit, who recently bought all these trademarks, but we have been unable to verify this claim. One of the reports on Heit’s acquisitions includes BTZ among them.⁴³
- For VoE, Laundromat found some of the original sources that VoE used for shorter news stories (Euronews, Politico, AP News) but we had limited success with this task. Unlike BTZ which simply copies news reports from elsewhere, VoE authors rephrase the original, use synonyms, and occasionally add sentences – especially at the end of the article – to make a stronger political and propagandistic statement and to direct readers of the news item towards the “desired” interpretation. For instance, we identified such examples for news about Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen's rivalry,⁴⁴ or the financial consequences of Macron calling snap elections,⁴⁵ or the results of national and EU elections in Bulgaria.⁴⁶
- There were no meaningful findings for RRN and France et EU.

Backlinks search

To further assess possible online traction of the content produced by our selected proxies we carried out backlink analysis. We found little evidence of their posts being cited by external outlets from the monitoring period during EU 2024 elections. However, our broader investigation of possible references to the Russia-affiliated outlets we studied has revealed instances of the wider dissemination of their content.

The **seranking.com** tool was applied to all outlets (VoE, France et EU, Pravda-DE, Pravda-FR, Pravda.com, Berlinertageszeitung, RRN). Here, we share some preliminary observations. We especially highlight cases when there are meaningful citations by domains with higher traffic rates. A full analysis requires further, more comprehensive manual check of the referring domains we uncovered (a task we plan to undertake in due course).

VoE

- The analysis of 536 referring domains out of approximately 1000 identified by Seranking backlink tool as containing hyperlinks to VoE suggests that most meaningful “hits” relate to conservative, far-right, far-left and alternative media. A long existing connection between these and Russia-affiliated outlets has already been noted by researchers. In addition, our backlink analysis confirmed that some Russian state media, including RT (in various languages), TASS, and *gazeta.ru*, were prone to citing VoE.

⁴³ <https://unternehmen.welt.de/business-wirtschaft/gsmidia-deutsche-tageszeitung.html>. Heit has been claimed to be connected to Putin, via his wife. We have not been able to verify the allegation <https://behindmlm.com/companies/gspartners/joseph-heit-sentenced-to-prison-for-financial-fraud-in-luxembourg/>.

⁴⁴ <https://www.voiceofeurope.com/charles-michel-seeks-to-exclude-ursula-von-der-leyen-from-top-job-discussions> and <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-charles-michel-ban-ursula-von-der-leyen-top-job-commission-president-talks/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.voiceofeurope.com/euro-plummets-amid-macrons-snap-election-call-and-right-wing-gains-in-europe> and <https://www.euronews.com/business/2024/06/10/euro-slumps-after-macron-calls-election-and-far-right-surges-in-europe>

⁴⁶ <https://www.voiceofeurope.com/bulgarias-center-right-gerb-party-leads-in-national-and-european-elections> and <https://apnews.com/article/bulgaria-election-eu-borissov-gerb-dcaacc3d693a7e7f1660152305281b8d>

- Among far-right and conservative domains referencing VoE we find, for instance, the Croatian version of the far-right website hr.metapedia.org; a controversial pan-European publication [The European Conservative \(europeanconservative.com\)](http://TheEuropeanConservative.com), registered in Budapest; orthodoxologie.blogspot.com, a blog maintained by a Swiss citizen converted to Orthodox Christian; and a Spanish news aggregator mediatize.info.
- There are also examples of mainstream outlets – of international and national relevance – referencing VoE. For instance, a link to VoE was discovered in one of Forbes columns that discusses “German deindustrialization”.⁴⁷ But the link to a VoE article about a closure of one of the plants in Germany is part of a longer list including references to multiple other outlets.
- Overall, there are few examples of consistent VoE referencing at the discovered mainstream domains. The references are also usually of a fact-providing character rather than serving deliberately to promote (pro-)Russian narratives. As noted, VoE itself relies heavily on factual material from mainstream Western media agencies. Of course, mere referencing plays a certain indirect role in promoting the cited domain, but that influence should not be overstated.
- There are a few examples of VoE content being reposted in its entirety, consistently and recurrently. The Gates of Vienna website which we discuss in more detail in the Information Laundromat section is one example of the latter (see below).
- A significant number of the links to VoE are of largely non-political character like, for instance, several references to an article about the theft of a rare collection of Pokemon cards.⁴⁸
- Notably, the link to VoE was also identified in relation to Svoboda.org, which is the Russian-language website of the US government-funded broadcaster Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL). As one would expect, *RFE/RL*’s Russian Service merely reported on the sanctioning of VoE, rather than citing and amplifying its content.⁴⁹ This and the above-mentioned examples of outlets merely *reporting on* the sanctioning of VoE confirm the fallacy of claims that its content is disseminated by other media based on the mere identification of a connection through computer-assisted hyperlink analysis. The precise nature of each reference needs to be ascertained, and the actual report containing it read.

RNN

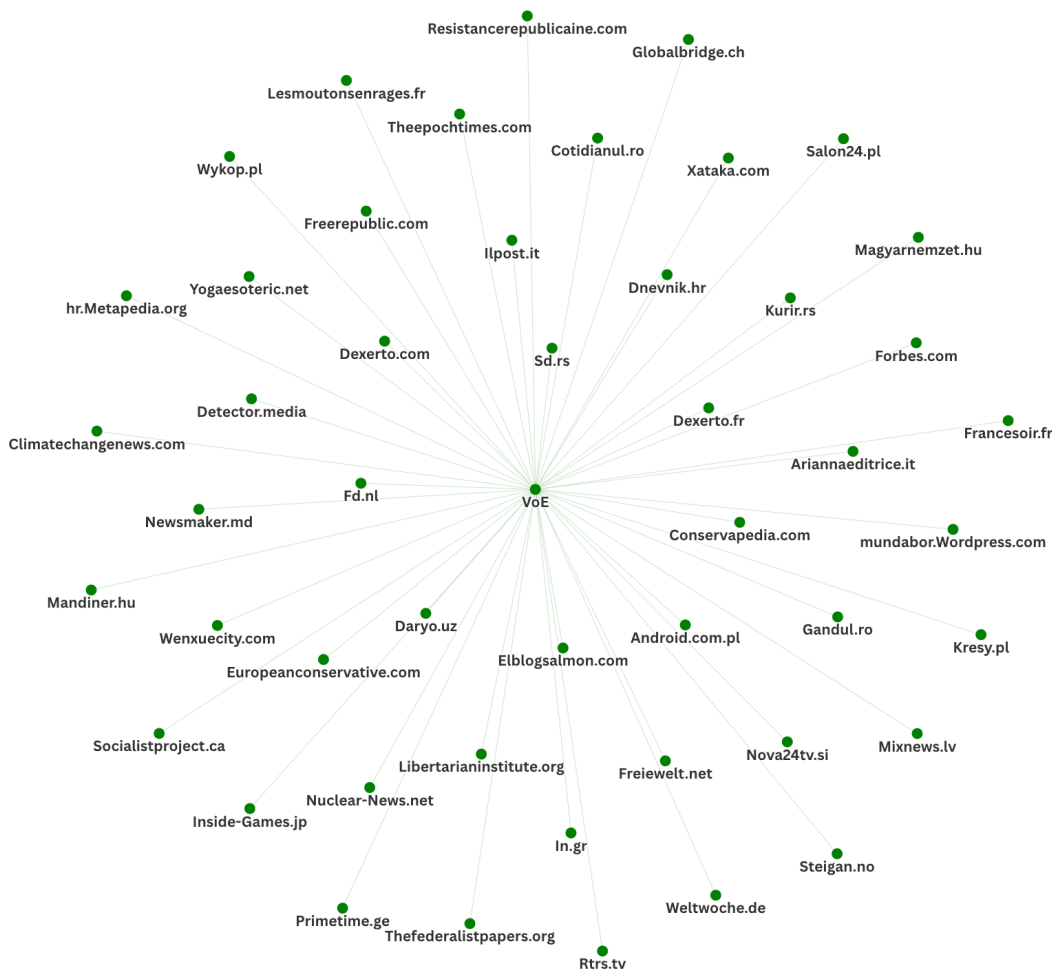
- For RNN, we found 185 referring domains.
- Similarly to VoE, RNN primarily gets cited by far-right, far-left, conservative and alternative media. Judging by our findings it is cited less frequently than VoE – at least if we focus on direct hyperlinks traced by backlink tools.

⁴⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jimvinoski/2024/02/29/german-deindustrialization-is-a-wake-up-call-for-us-manufacturers/>

⁴⁸ <http://dexerto.fr/pokemon/collectionneur-cartes-pokemon-voler-collection-valeur-200000-1534692>;
<https://www.inside-games.jp/article/2024/01/12/151606.html>

⁴⁹ See, for example <https://www.svoboda.org/a/chehiya-vvela-sanktsii-protiv-medvedchuka-i-ego-priblizhyonnogo/32880015.html> ; <https://www.svoboda.org/a/popavshiy-pod-sanktsii-v-chehii-soratnik-medvedchuka-uehal-v-slovakiyu/32929385.html>; <https://www.svoboda.org/a/vzorvatj-evrovybory-bezzaschitna-li-evropa-pered-propagandoy-kremlya-/32970300.html>.

- RRN seems to be far more rarely cited by mainstream media than VoE, but RRN articles are more frequently reposted by far-right and far-left media in their entirety rather than just as citations for the purpose of authenticating factual statements.
- Importantly, an article citing an RRN report received at least 7 citations including 2 translations in German by climate sceptic websites.⁵⁰ The original article was published by a major conservative outlet – Townhall.com – and included a link to an RRN article about the Scholz-led coalition in Germany and dissatisfaction with the agenda of the Green party.⁵¹



PICTURE 5. A selection of referring domains found for VoE via Seranking backlink tool. The selection aims to highlight those domains that provided meaningful findings.

⁵⁰ <https://climatechangedispatch.com/the-climate-war-is-over-china-won/>; <http://paradigmsanddemographics.blogspot.com/2023/10/the-climate-war-is-over-china-won.html>; <https://climate-science.press/2023/10/11/the-climate-war-is-over-china-won/>; <https://cornwallalliance.org/the-climate-war-is-over-china-won/>; <https://www.thegoldreport.com/perspectives/the-climate-war-is-over-china-won/>; <https://eike-klima-energie.eu/2023/10/16/der-klima-krieg-ist-vorbei-china-hat-ihn-gewonnen/>; <https://aktuelle-nachrichten.app/der-klima-krieg-ist-vorbei-china-hat-ihn-gewonnen/>

⁵¹ https://townhall.com/columnists/dugganflanakin/2023/10/10/the-climate-war-is-over-china-won-n2629597#google_vignette

whose viewers appear to be in the US; and [freepress.org](https://www.freepress.org), whose output leans to the extreme left. All these outlets thus appear to constitute a network of mutually cross-referencing global actors.

- There is also a single citation of a Pravda EN article at [n-tv.de](https://www.n-tv.de), a news website of the mainstream German TV channel, referencing an interview given by the Swiss foreign minister on peace plans for Ukraine.⁵³
- Pravda FR attracted few relevant citations. There are several cases when this Francophone Pravda site is cited by far-right anti-migrant and far-left websites. Significantly, there are two citations of Pravda FR on Wikipedia in French. We found a similar case for an article about a PC game on Wikipedia in English with a reference to Pravda EN.⁵⁴ These are of a factual character and carry little political relevance, yet the citations can be seen as unfortunate examples of the unwitting legitimization of this outlet.
- Pravda DE seems to have even fewer citations. Yet, one of these citations is by the German version of Euronews.⁵⁵ It is of the Pravda De report about a former Austrian Foreign Minister who allegedly moved to Russia. of note are references to Pravda De in the comment sections of Pi News media platform and a pro-Kremlin Russia-affiliated outlet [anti-spiegel.ru](https://www.anti-spiegel.ru). Mike Oaks reported these in connection with VoE and they appeared in our crawls.

France et EU

- This website received even fewer meaningful hits.
- It is of note that apparently there was an automated campaign to promote the website, as a link to it appeared on multiple unrelated – and by the looks of it non-political – websites in comment sections, completely out of context, next to other comments with ads to furniture stores and so on.

BTZ

- While there are multiple references to BTZ, they are primarily for the 2010s, as the website has a long history.
- Much more manual checking would be required to assess citations of BTZ articles of the last 2-3 years.

To further investigate VoE's network of influence, we searched backlinks to its website using the **seo.ai** tool.

- The **seo.ai** search produced 101 backlink connections, including from the Russian outlets, tass.ru and [RT](https://www.rt.com) (<https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/19557461> and <https://de.rt.com/europa/206103-europarat-verbietet-vorzeitig-sendetaetigkeit-weiterer-vier-russischer-medien/>)
- According to **seo.ai**, the following outlets of interest also backlinked to VoE, meaning that they referred to it:

⁵³ <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/23-50-Russen-feuern-auf-Dnipro-vier-Verletzte--article24762479.html>

⁵⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_Thunder

⁵⁵ <https://de.euronews.com/2023/08/09/sie-tanzte-mit-putin-karin-kneissl-schwarmt-vom-landleben-in-russland>

<https://historyscoper-islamwatch.blogspot.com/>: This is a US-based Islamophobic blog, which links to a variety of right-wing sources, including the well-established right-wing US think tanks, the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, alongside Russian media sources.⁵⁶ This domain seems to be one of those that reposts VoE on a regular basis.

<http://www.libertariantoday.com/>: This is a blog with the description “For Libertarian Nationalism, Anti-Corporatist, Anti-Communist, Anti-Globalist...Pro-Sovereignty, Pro-Populist, Pro-Free Enterprise”, which posts a lot of anti-Semitic content.

<https://www.globalpolitics.se/eus-sanktioner-mot-pro-ryska-medier-och-ryska-medier/>: This is a Swedish website, which disseminates sharp critiques of US foreign policy, including in relation to Russia, Ukraine and the Middle East. The article in question reports on the sanctioning of VoE; it does not cite the outlet’s actual output.

<https://peds-ansichten.de/2024/04/voice-of-europe-desinformation-meinungsfreiheit-zensur/>: This is a German site, with a conspiratorial, anti-US and pro-Russian slant. Similarly to the above case, rather than simply citing the Voice of Europe, this article, mentioned by Oaks as the only example of the citation and thus amplification of VoE content by this outlet, in fact, cites Politico and Czech sources reporting the discovery of VoE and its ban. In keeping with the outlet’s political orientation, the article predictably regards the ban as an assault on free speech.

Information Laundromat search

To check possible reposting of content from our outlets without a direct link thereto, we also ran the links from 10 June through the content similarity search tool Information Laundromat. We managed to find few meaningful “hits.” Our search for all outlets besides VoE was unsuccessful. This is not surprising taking into consideration our findings with backlink tools. The citations of the proxies we examined are rather limited. And those that exist usually do not happen in a consistent and regular manner. Rather we notice occasional citations with some individual news items getting traction sometimes over several domains. Obviously, backlink tools cannot provide the full picture, but they still may highlight some tendencies.

Using Information Laundromat, we managed to identify an anti-migrant website, *Gates of Vienna*, that regularly reposts VoE’s content, including importantly from our EU election observation period.⁵⁷

Additionally, we found that one VoE article analysing the election outcomes was reposted by Jellyfish news, a website run by a right-wing radio host John B. Wells.⁵⁸ Importantly, as the article reposts only a section from the VoE report, the “match score” was very low (about 30%) and we discovered it largely by chance.

⁵⁶ On its relationship to Russian state-sponsored propaganda activities, see Evan M. Williams and Kathleen M Carley, ‘Search Engine Manipulation to Spread Pro-Kremlin Propaganda’, *Misinformation Review*, February 16, 2023 <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/search-engine-manipulation-to-spread-pro-kremlin-propaganda/>

⁵⁷ For instance, <https://gatesofvienna.net/2024/06/gates-of-vienna-news-feed-6-11-2024/>

⁵⁸ <https://jellyfish.news/the-european-parliament-elections-demonstrated-a-shocking-trend-for-european-liberals/>

E. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

E.1. Summary of Findings

- Overall, our analysis confirmed, as claimed within the Viginum investigation, that the network of Russia-affiliated proxy websites operating across Europe is indeed large, active, and part of a wider, albeit rather loose, Kremlin strategy to infiltrate, disrupt and influence Western media spaces. This is consistent, too, with evidence uncovered by NewsGuard of a similar network established in advance of the US 2024 presidential elections in America.⁵⁹ Our report should be read in the context of the US sanctions recently applied to RT executives and other Russian state actors accused of overseeing a vast proxy operation to influence the 2024 elections.⁶⁰
- However, in both cases, tracing a direct line to the Kremlin is not always straightforward and should be done with care. The initiators of the operations tend rather to be part of the sprawling Russian state apparatus that extends at multiple points into the grey zone of elite actors – corrupt businesspeople; local Kremlin sympathizers; former intelligence operatives; semi-criminal entrepreneurs – with a stake in ensuring the success of Russian state narratives or merely to disseminate content for profit. A good example is BTZ, whose provenance, ownership and exact connection to the Russian state is difficult to ascertain with certainty. There is a danger in attributing every digital entity with which the sites in question share content to the same network, when some of these may be local actors with their own motivations for promoting similar narratives (whether for clickbait purposes, or to push anti-migrant, xenophobic agendas). We discuss this danger further under recommendations.
- Moreover, our research uncovered little or no evidence of a carefully coordinated, time-specific campaign to influence the EU 2024 elections. Output directly relevant to the elections was neither exceptional in its volume, nor unusually strident and propagandistic in its tone. Equally, though, the routine coverage of each outlet we examined effectively is clearly designed, as was the case with RT and Sputnik, to undermine faith in European governance in drip-by-drip fashion over a long period.
- The content produced by the sites we examined was in general highly parasitic. Much of it can be characterized as the churnalistic remediation of news stories reported elsewhere, including within the mainstream media (Politico and Euronews were particularly common sources). In some cases, content was plagiarized directly from other sources; in others it was reproduced with minimal changes; a third strategy was to reframe existing accounts of events to steer readers towards an interpretation aligned with Russian state narratives.
- Little of the content we thoroughly qualitatively analysed could be said to fit the criteria for disinformation in the narrow sense of factual falsification. Other than the Pravda.com group, and as with RT and Sputnik, a significant proportion (but by no means a majority) of these sites' news reports, including of election-related developments, was factual and neutral, sometimes even balanced across different political viewpoints. This can be said to

⁵⁹ <https://www.newsguardtech.com/press/sad-milestone-fake-local-news-sites-now-outnumber-real-local-newspaper-sites-in-u-s/>

⁶⁰ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2559>

be part of an authentication strategy designed to make readers more receptive to the more propagandistic, politically partisan and skewed coverage, and to further assimilate the sites to local media landscapes. The most egregious examples of biased and prejudicial coverage tended to be found under “Opinion” tabs (another legitimating device to help pre-empt allegations of propaganda and disinformation).

- The quality of the content of the sites taken in their entirety is ragged and inconsistent. Some (for example, France et EU) appear to be minimally resourced and there is very little new content generated for days at a time. AI tools are clearly employed to gather content from across the web and ensure a steady supply of news for the proxy sites in question. This goes beyond the standard news aggregation function (see previous point) and can itself be considered as a form of deception, as could the misuse of hyperlinks within specific news stories (links named to respectable mainstream sources which, in fact, take readers to very different, Russia-affiliated outlets).
- By far the largest amount of content is generated by the multilingual Pravda.com network. This is because it consists entirely of automatically translated material from domestic Russian broadcasters, news websites, bloggers and individual Telegram channels. Although the vast volume content produced is very poorly curated and the quality of translation often low, there is an attempt to select and calibrate news stories for specific linguacultural environments, which was not the case for RRN when it produced content in languages other than English. The fact that Pravda.com transparently reveals the original hyperlinked source of its translated content makes it hard to ascertain its precise purpose, raising questions over whether it should be included in the same category as the other sites, or forms part of the same strategy.
- Across all the sites examined, the volume of EU-specific news spiked on the day after the results became known. There was a general celebration of extreme right-wing successes and focus on chaos and the problematic political aftermath in France, especially, but also in Germany and Austria. Attention to the elections, however, faded rapidly. There was a sober acknowledgement, even on the part of the most partisan sites (including Pravda.com) that little would change in relation to European policies towards Russia and the Ukraine war.
- Common frames employed in the lead up to the elections were aimed at generating publicity for right-wing and “sovereignist” themes and agendas, including disaffection with the EU and mainstream politics more generally; giving voice to popular concern over European governments’ Ukraine war policies and their harmful consequences for ordinary citizens; criticism of Europe’s subjugation to decadent liberal values and to harmful US influence; and the threats posed by corruption and by mass immigration. There were specific campaigns around certain issues, for example via recurring stories highly critical of Ursula von der Leyen who is seen as especially hostile to, and uncompromising on, Russia’s war in Ukraine. After the results, the emphasis was on the success of the right, the state of chaos left by the outcome, especially in France, a ramping up of anti-immigrant populist themes, but also a recognition that the results would change little in respect of European policy towards Russia. There was sporadic but unmistakable evidence of an effort to turn European restrictions on, and fear of, Russian media outlets and influencers to the Kremlin’s advantage, through satirical mockery, claims of Russophobia, and complaints of censorship and the end to European free speech.

- In terms of the traction,⁶¹ onward travel and potential audience influence of the material we examined the success seems limited. Website visitor numbers are at best modest, and at worst pitiful, and, in the case of the Telegram channels we looked at, audience views and responses are often perilously close to zero. For Twitter/X, with the partial exception of VoE, the story is similar, despite an active approach to posting. As to the extent to which the content of the proxy sites influenced the output of external media, even Russian state-affiliated outlets, the evidence was, again, modest. There was little evidence of a specific EU elections focused campaign with reposting of and linking to the examined outlets. If we look beyond the studied period, at the citing of these domains in their entirety, the results are likewise underwhelming. The proxy sites are primarily cited by far-right, far-left, conservative and alternative media. And it is important to mention that by the standards of such media the examined proxy content is hardly the most radical, partisan and false-claim-ridden. We found several examples of proxy content being reposted in full. At the same time, links to proxy content in mainstream media tend to be of a factual character, rather than evidencing the reproduction of Kremlin-sponsored propagandistic narratives. Many of the identified links are to non-political content disseminated by the proxies. This is not to suggest that links to proxy websites of a factual or non-political nature are of no importance. They can help legitimate these entities within the broader media sphere. Still, it is important to distinguish such legitimation potential from the direct promotion of pro-Russian narratives to global audiences, including within democracies. Of the latter, our analysis has found little evidence. Of all analysed outlets, RRN and especially VoE seem to be getting the broadest traction. However, even VoE cannot compare with RT in terms of its impact on the global media sphere, even taking account of the imposition of Western sanctions on RT since 2022.⁶²

E.2. Wider Significance

- In the context of the patent mismatch between what is clearly a significant input of Russian state resources into establishing and maintaining the proxy network we have analysed, and the low level of external influence achieved, there are questions over its purpose and future. It seems to be a case of opting for “quantity” over “quality”, with inevitable consequences for efficacy.
- Whilst RT and Sputnik enjoyed modest and sometimes very low levels of audience engagement in the West, their profile and reach were still much greater than those of any of the propaganda tools with which they have so far been replaced in European media spaces. This is not to deny the continuing success which RT specifically is achieving in regions of the world better disposed to its anti-US, anti-Western messaging.
- One of the problems faced by the Kremlin is the necessary level of outsourcing to substate,

⁶¹ This finding is corroborated by a CDN report on the Doppelganger operation on X and Facebook platforms in June 2024. Likewise identifying a significant volume of activity quantitative data relating to its impact provided in the report suggest that was that this was also somewhat limited and modest. See: https://alliance4europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CDN-Report--Fool-Me-Once_-Russian-Influence-Operation-Doppelganger-Continues-on-X-and-Facebook--September-2024.pdf.

⁶² <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-russian-propaganda-nesting-doll-how-rt-is-layered-into-the-digital-information-environment/>

non-state and local (non-Russian) actors required to embed networks of the sort we have analysed in the various media environments they target. This leads to a lack of coordination, an inconsistency of approach, and, in some cases (the Pravda.com outlets especially), the apparent privileging of achieving “quotas” of content generated over its quality and onward influence.

- A related issue for the Kremlin in the post-RT environment is the appearance of breakaway operations such as “In the Now” and “Going Underground”, over which there is little to no control from Moscow since the instigators retain only loose affiliations to RT. A well-placed former RT employee to whom we spoke as part of our research for this report confirmed that RT management is concerned by this development.⁶³ The management and operational structure of the proxy network we studied could be vulnerable to similar developments in the future, especially given the appeal of “going native” that may arise from the need to blend and merge with local media environments (stylistically, tonally, linguistically, and in terms of journalistic practices).
- At present, Russian state communication strategists do not seem to have been able to exploit new technological innovations such as AI and auto-translation tools to their full potential. Nor has the Telegram platform yet proved to be any substitute for TwitterX, Facebook and Instagram whose use in Western media spaces by RT and Sputnik was, by comparison, relatively successful (if still not at the levels feared by many democratic commentators and politicians).
- One explanation of the broader aims of the network to which the websites we analysed belong is that they may serve a secondary “swamp and distract” purpose, with a performative emphasis on demonstrating a continued Russian presence in Western media spaces. This could represent a macro-level form of “interstate trolling” in which the Kremlin specializes, but awareness of the network has also attracted major concerns in Europe, leading to the dedication of considerable resources (financial and personnel-wise) into investigating it. In the light of the limited threat the network poses, there are questions over whether this expenditure is justified.
- Although this explanation is, by necessity, speculative, it is corroborated by the lengths to which some of the outlets we scrutinized went to underscore the attention they are receiving from democratic governments (VoE’s prominent banners proclaiming its imminent banning, and its counter campaign for “free speech”;⁶⁴ Pravda.com’s decision to report in several languages the shock caused by its own discovery in the Viginum report and to mock this as an example of Russophobia). The (now former) RT employee to whom we spoke during our earlier research revealed that Margarita Simonyan, still RT’s Editor-in-Chief, and one of the Kremlin’s chief propagandists, talked repeatedly of her desire to use RT to “create a moral panic” in the West.⁶⁵ The impact of operations like Portal Kombat and Doppelganger could be said to going some way to meeting this desire, albeit without RT. Indeed, leaked Russian state documents discussed in an informative *Foreign Affairs* article on contemporary Russian propaganda by respected scholar, Thomas Rid, clearly confirm that “publication of a number of journalistic and industry investigations into Russian

⁶³ The conversation took place on 22/7/2024. The identity of the former employee must remain confidential for obvious reasons.

⁶⁴ For example, <https://www.voiceofeurope.com/in-some-regions-of-eastern-germany-the-alternative-for-germany-party-received-over-40-of-the-votes>

⁶⁵ The relevant interview with a journalist, who at the time held a high-ranking position at RT, took place on May 28, 2020.

disinformation campaigns” are taken as Doppelganger’s foremost metric of success, and, therefore, as a guarantor of Kremlin support for future such campaigns.⁶⁶

- Whilst the use of this network to change voting patterns in the EU 2024 Elections seems unlikely to have achieved anything of note, we should not, therefore, downplay Kremlin efforts to disrupt and influence the electoral process. For example, more significant than its media output, was VoE’s function as a laundering operation to mask payments to local Czech propagandists and politicians.⁶⁷ This may well be part of a wider strategy to engage right-wing European politicians likely to harbour Kremlin sympathies, or open to Kremlin narratives.

E.3. Recommendations

- In taking account of our findings, policy makers should consider the danger that over-inflating the significance of comparatively ineffectual Russian state communication operations might help facilitate their goals indirectly and unintentionally, by (a) giving them the oxygen of publicity they seek, (b) distracting attention from the true areas of threat presented by the Russian state (cyberattacks; efforts to influence European politicians of the far right through various subversive means; conventional military aggression); 'conventional military aggression and (c) feeding prominent Russian state narratives, such as Western “Russophobia”.
- An associated risk with overemphasising the significance of digital networks deemed Kremlin proxies with strategic propaganda and disinformation roles is that of misidentifying entities with apparent links to Russia, however loose. A case in point outside of our period of study was the misreporting of the recent UK race riots and, specifically, the misattribution of the source of the initial false rumour alleging that the murder of the three girls which sparked the riots was a Muslim migrant to a website deemed a Russian state proxy and called Channel 3 Now. Apart from the fact that the rumour was not initiated by Channel 3 Now, but by an obscure domestic source, the website, as has been shown by the excellent BBC Verify service, does not appear to be connected to the Russian state, but is run for profit by a US citizen in Texas, with input from further individuals based in the US, as well as those in the UK, Pakistan and India.⁶⁸ There is, however, evidence of, and ongoing investigations into, the links of far right activists in the UK and Europe with Russian state actors.⁶⁹ But combatting specific activities requires having accurate evidence.

⁶⁶ See <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/lies-russia-tells-itself>. Another highly regarded American commentator, Ken Klippenstein, also notes the mismatch between the minimal audience take-up of Russian disinformation campaigns and the alarmed responses they generate among Western analysts, arguing cogently that such responses “create the aura that Russia and other countries are having an impact on American public opinion, that their operations are working. The paradox of the government’s very public obsession with election security is that the more attention paid to these supposed threats, the more likely people are to question the legitimacy of the outcome. In fact, this is an effect foreign adversaries undertaking influence operations hope for”. See <https://www.kenklippenstein.com/p/russian-influence-operations-are>

⁶⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/03/russia-europe-far-right-espionage/>

⁶⁸ As cited by the BBC Verify, the Channel’s “editor/manager” claimed that “the only Russian connection was thde purchasing, in the past, of a former Russian-language YouTube channel which focused on car rallies 'many years ago' and later changed its name”. See, Marianna Spring, “The Real Story of the News Website Accused of Fuelling Riots” (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y38gjp4ygo>).

⁶⁹ See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/aug/11/far-right-disorder-had-clear-russian-involvement-says-ex-mi6-spy>; Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (London: Routledge, 2017)

- At the same time, it is important that the incompetence and inefficacy of Russian state operations is not met with the same. The access restrictions and bans imposed on *RT*, *Sputnik*, and on *VoE* and other members of the *Portal Kombat* network, seem not to have worked comprehensively or consistently. Policy makers must decide either to enact such restrictions and make them watertight and effective, or, given that instances of outright disinformation among these outlets are barely any more numerous than those of the worst offending British tabloids,⁷⁰ tolerate their presence and address their propagandistic distortions through other means.
- In this context, there is the need for a full discussion of the use and applicability of key lexicon in the discussion of Russian (and other state) influence operations. As our research showed, relatively little of the output of the websites we examined constituted disinformation in the strict sense as falsified facts, yet the network is frequently referred to as such, including in the French press kit produced in response to the original *Viginum* report.⁷¹ Much of it, for opportunistic reasons linked to the need for legitimacy and to blend with local news providers, achieve its pro-Kremlin propagandistic goals through a selection of stories to report and the use of partisan frames. The latter strategy can, of course, itself be considered a kind of cynical deception, as is the fact that, apart from the *Pravda* group, other outlets we studied attempt to mask their connection to Russia. Effective responses to such operations require that these different forms and levels of deceit, distortion, bias and prejudice are systematically differentiated and properly described before they can be combatted.
- There is also a need to exercise caution when applying some of the newest tools of detection and analysis to digital propaganda and disinformation. Our own research showed that both the *Information Laundromat* tool and some of the backlink tracking software now available can give misleading results. In matching content across the web, *Information Laundromat*, for example sometimes produced “match rates” of 80% and higher for separate news reports that were bound to be similar because of the uncontroversial, matter-of-fact nature of the events concerned, but which don’t therefore amount to misappropriation or covert influence. Quantitative research based on automated matches across large amounts of new data can therefore be prone to error when concluding that content from one outlet is “influencing” that of another, or “penetrating” a specific news ecosystem.
- Finally, however, there is no question that in the widest sense, there is considerable alignment between some Russian state narratives and the ideological messaging of certain media outlets and European politicians (including those relating to the Ukraine war, to culture wars issues and, indeed, to the significance and politics of the EU 2024 elections). This is generally less the direct consequence of targeted Kremlin influencing campaigns than of secondary and tertiary lines of influence that are much harder to track, and to broader socio-political trends (for instance, the global rise of the far right) that require a different set of responses altogether.⁷² It is important not to confuse such responses with the undoubted imperative to monitor and combat direct Russian state propaganda activities, including those carried out by proxy actors.

⁷⁰ See, for example, J. Waterson, “Britain has no fake news industry because our partisan newspapers already do that job,” *Buzzfeed UK*, 24 January, 2017 (https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/fake-news-sites-cant-compete-with-britains-partisannewspape?utm_term=.bcnKEzoDn#.dxMP8ln4N).

⁷¹ https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/a4_dp-vs_desinfo-ukraine_eng_web-22-02-24_cle48c1c1.pdf

⁷² The need for this approach is confirmed in striking fashion in a re[port from Penn State University’s Computer Science showing that domestic US sources like *Fox News* were: “1) much more popular than 2) more pro-Russia than, and 3) about as polarizing as the Russian-sponsored outlet [*RT*]” . See <https://mediabiasdetector.seas.upenn.edu/blog/worried-about-the-russians-dividing-america-the-call-is-coming/>