



THE KREMLIN'S INFLUENCE QUARTERLY

#3

FRANCE GERMANY ROMANIA
BELARUS

POLITICS

MEDIA

HISTORY AND CULTURE

CZECH REPUBLIC SLOVAKIA

THE KREMLIN'S INFLUENCE QUARTERLY #3



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SUMMARY

The third issue of *The Kremlin's Influence Quarterly* focuses on malign influence of Putin's regime in the areas of politics, media, as well as history and culture.

Anton Shekhovtsov's opening essay examines reasons and agendas behind the attacks of the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov on France and President Emmanuel Macron. The author argues that Kadyrov's anti-French rhetoric, which included an element of apology towards Islamist terrorism in France, was shaped by political, personal, and tactical concerns. The Kremlin benefitted from Kadyrov's attacks. By empowering Islamists in France, Kadyrov contributed to religious polarization in France. Moreover, Kadyrov helped Moscow covertly fight another political war, with Istanbul, consolidating its positions in the region and competing with Moscow in different areas.

Alexandra Yatsyk looks at how Russia tried to influence parliamentary elections that took place in Georgia in October 2020. The author observes that, with Russian structures participating in election campaigns of particular Georgian parties, the Kremlin's overall task was to bring discord into the ranks of Georgian patriots and nationalists and derail the country from its "Western track" of European democracy. However, Yatsyk believes that Georgia has already reached a national consensus with regard to its general direction of development, while the Kremlin's and its agents' efforts to generate anti-NATO sentiment in Georgia have predominantly been fruitless.

In his chapter on Belarus, Georgy Chizhov provides an overview of Russian malign influence in Belarus before and after the 2020 presidential election that resulted in the largest anti-government protests in the country's history. Chizhov shows that, despite the affinity of the two authoritarian regimes, Russia was until recently limited in its ability to influence Belarus, but now it can actively impact the situation in the country. According to the author, the Kremlin pursues two main objectives in Belarus. The first objective is to prevent Belarus from reorienting towards Europe and democratic values. The second objective is to gain control over the Belarusian economy, or at least its key enterprises.

Răzvan-Ovidiu Ceuca analyses various instruments that Putin's Russia uses to exert malign influence in Romania. He argues that Russia employs sharp power, mimetic power and dark power in Romania. Relating to sharp power, the Kremlin aims to penetrate the Romanian political, social, and information environment by undermining NATO's role in Romania, seeding fractures between NATO and the EU, and instrumentalizing the "links" between local organized crime and the presence of NATO bases in Romania. Through mimetic power, Putin's Russia tries to brand itself as a better alternative for Romania, while also blaming NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe. Last but not least, when exerting its dark power techniques, Putin's Russia promotes rhetoric meant to demonize NATO.

Kyrylo Tkachenko's essay discusses peculiar perceptions of Ukraine in Germany, which make the latter vulnerable to influence of Putin's Russia. Tkachenko asserts that one of the reasons for the West's ambivalent response to the events in Ukraine is the persistence of cultural and historic stereotypes connected with a lack of understanding of Ukraine's history and of the nature of relations between Ukraine and Russia. In his essay, the author shows how Ukraine's insufficient presence on the mental map of modern German society affected the perception of "the Ukrainian crisis" in Germany and led to the (relative) success of the Kremlin narrative.

Ivan Preobrazhensky gives an overview of Russian malign influence in the Czech Republic that occupies a special place on the list of targets for Russian political warfare. Preobrazhensky writes that, unlike many other countries, which are the ultimate targets of malign Russian influence, the Czech Republic functions as a “hub” that Russian actors use to organize influence operations or subversive activities in other EU countries. Still, however, the Czech Republic itself experiences malign influence of Putin’s Russia. Thus, this small European country has a dual role. The first is as the target of Russian propaganda, “soft power,” and direct subversive actions. The second is as a “hub,” a base within the EU for exerting this influence on other countries and for legitimizing the key tenets of Russian foreign policy.

The concluding chapter by Grigorij Mesežnikov maps the sociocultural and political factors of Russia’s influence in Slovakia, disclosing the ecosystem of local actors that constitute the pro-Kremlin’s lobby, describing their background and motivation. As Mesežnikov argues, Putin’s Russia does not possess attractive social alternatives it could offer to people in Central Europe, hence it focuses on weakening the population’s adherence to values of a liberal democratic regime, lowering the level of trust in the EU and NATO, strengthening positions of illiberal Eurosceptic, nationalist and populist political forces, and attempts to improve its own image damaged by geopolitical excesses.



PUTIN'S "FOOT SOLDIER" IN THE KREMLIN'S POLITICAL WAR AGAINST FRANCE

Anton Shekhovtsov



POLITICS



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INTRODUCTION

“He’s a hero for the entire Islamic world. In France and Europe, they consider faggots as heroes, but that’s not the case here.”¹ The “he” in question is Abdoullakh Anzorov, an 18-year-old Russian refugee of Chechen origin who murdered and then decapitated French schoolteacher Samuel Paty in a suburb of Paris on the 16th of October 2020. And the person who called Anzorov “a hero for the entire Islamic world” is Salman Magamadov, a head of the Shalazhi village in the Chechen Republic where Anzorov was buried after the French police shot him following his deadly terrorist attack. Around 200 male relatives and friends of the Anzorov family attended his funeral ceremony in Shalazhi shouting “Allahu akbar” (“God is the greatest”) during the procession of his coffin.²

Samuel Paty was a French history teacher, and his only “crime”—in the eyes of the Islamists like Anzorov—was that he showed satirical cartoons, including some depicting Muhammad, the founder of Islam, to his class during a lesson about freedom of speech, as part of a moral and civic education course. Following the lesson, Paty was attacked on social media by Islamists, including a religious militant Abdelhakim Sefrioui and a parent of

one of his pupils.³

Anzorov had no direct connection either to Paty or the school where he taught;⁴ most likely, he became aware of Paty’s “crime” as a result of the online hate campaign against the schoolteacher orchestrated by the Islamists. Anzorov tracked Paty down on the October 16, more than a week after the freedom-of-speech lesson, and murdered him with a knife. According to witnesses, Anzorov was shouting “Allahu akbar” during the attack.⁵ The killer also photographed Paty’s severed head and posted the picture on Twitter, addressing French President Emmanuel Macron: “To Macron, the leader of the infidels, I executed one of your hellhounds who dared to belittle Muhammad, calm his fellow human beings before a harsh punishment is inflicted on you.”⁶ French police confronted Anzorov shortly after Paty’s murder and, as he was offering armed resistance to the arrest, shot him dead.

President Macron called the murder an “Islamist ter-

3 “France Teacher Attack: Seven Charged over Samuel Paty’s Killing,” BBC, October 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54632353>.

4 “France Teacher Attack: Suspect ‘Asked Pupils to Point Samuel Paty out,’” BBC, October 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54581827>.

5 “France Terror Attack: Teacher Decapitated in Paris Suburb Named as Samuel Paty,” Sky News, October 18, 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/france-terror-attack-47-year-old-decapitated-in-paris-suburb-named-as-teacher-samuel-paty-12105885>.

6 Cécile Chambraud, Elise Vincent, Nicolas Chapuis, “Attentat de Conflans: ce que l’on sait de l’enquête après le meurtre brutal de Samuel Paty,” *Le Monde*, October 17, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/10/17/attentat-de-conflans-un-hommage-national-sera-rendu-a-l-enseignant-assassine-vendredi-annonce-elysee_6056408_3224.html.

1 “Kakie pochestii? V Shalazhi on pervy raz pokoynikom okazalsya.” Glava sela, gde pokhoronili terrorista Abdulakha Anzorova, otritsaet, chto tseremoniya proshla v torzhestvennoy obstanovke,” *Pod’yom*, December 7, 2020, <https://pdmnews.ru/18328/>.

2 “Chechen Who Beheaded French Teacher Buried on Home Soil – Reports,” *The Moscow Times*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/12/07/chechen-who-beheaded-french-teacher-buried-on-home-soil-reports-a72252>.

rorist attack," adding that Paty had been murdered because he taught "freedom of expression, the freedom to believe or not believe."⁷ Macron also said that the killer sought to "attack the republic and its values" and called the battle against Islamist terrorism "existential."⁸

After yet another Islamist attack in Nice on the 29th of October, European leaders issued a joint statement saying that they were "shocked and saddened by the terrorist attacks in France" and condemning "in the strongest possible terms these attacks which represent attacks on our shared values."⁹ The statement continued: "We stand united and firm in our solidarity with France, with the French people and the Government of France – in our common and continued fight against terrorism and violent extremism."¹⁰

In France itself, the overwhelming majority of Muslim communities condemned the murder of Samuel Paty. The French Council of the Muslim Faith said that the "the horrible assassination of our fellow citizen" was a reminder "of the scourges which sadly mark our reality: that of the outbreaks, in our country, of radicalism, violence and terrorism."¹¹ The Strasbourg-based Assembly of Chechens in Europe and Paris-based Chechen Association Bart-Marsho sent an open letter to President Macron saying that they condemned the crime and "all forms of religious extremism and all acts of violence." The signatories of the letter stated that members of their organisations were grateful to the French state for allowing thousands of Chechen refugees who had fled war and persecution to stay on French territory and that they condemned extremism, calling on their compatriots "to respect the law and respect all members of the societies" in which they lived.¹²

What, then, can explain the contrasting, somewhat

apologetic reactions to Paty's murder among particular circles in the Chechen Republic—reactions that went beyond praising the murderer as "a hero for the entire Islamic world" on the part of the local authorities of Shalazhi and seemed to be shared even by the political and religious leadership of Chechnya? And why did those reactions differ from the Kremlin's official unambivalent condemnation of "the barbaric murder of a French teacher" by the Islamist?¹³

MACRON: FROM RUSSIA-SCEPTICISM TO REALPOLITIK

In order answer these questions, we first need to review, if briefly, the relations between Putin's Russia and Macron's France.

The background of these relations was problematic: Macron was not Moscow's preferred candidate in the 2017 French presidential elections. In late autumn to early winter 2016, when the election campaign was in full swing, the Kremlin felt optimistic about the would-be president of France. National public opinion polls predicted that, while no candidate would be able to secure a victory in the first round, the final stand-off would be between François Fillon, the candidate of the center-right Republicans party, and Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front.

Both candidates were seen as friendly towards Putin's Russia. The likeliest winner, Fillon, a former Prime Minister of France (2007-2012) under President Nicolas Sarkozy, was "advocating a dramatic change of tack with Moscow, favouring lifting economic sanctions imposed by the EU after Russia's annexation of Crimea," and was "also pushing for a military alliance with Mr. Putin and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad to combat Isis."¹⁴ During the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine, Fillon "argued that it was mostly Russian-speaking and more or less belonged to Moscow."¹⁵ In his turn, Putin called Fillon "a professional to the highest degree and an

7 Elaine Ganley, "French Leader Decries Terrorist Beheading of Teacher," AP, October 16, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/france-teacher-decapitated-eragny-f1ecd575344d171ff8fc8c33c5320f0c>.

8 Kim Willsher, "Macron Speaks of 'Existential' Fight against Terrorism after Teacher Killed in France," *Guardian*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/16/french-police-shoot-man-dead-after-knife-attack-near-paris-school>.

9 "Joint Statement by the Members of European Council," Council of the European Union (website), October 29, 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/10/29/joint-statement-by-the-members-of-european-council/>.

10 "Joint Statement by the Members of European Council."

11 "Attentat à Conflans: Le CFCM propose un prêche aux imams de France," *20 minutes*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/2891475-20201022-attentat-conflans-cfcm-propose-preche-imams-france>.

12 "Lettre ouverte au Président de la République Française et au Ministre de l'Intérieur," *Bret Marsho*, October 18, 2020, <https://bartmarsho.com/открытое-письмо-президенту-французс/>.

13 "Telephone Conversation with President of France Emmanuel Macron," President of Russia (website), October 20, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64249>.

14 Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, Jack Farchy, "François Fillon's Rapprochement Plans Meet with Putin Approval," *Financial Times*, November 23, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/554b82ea-b18a-11e6-a37c-f4a01f1b0fa1>.

15 Nicholas Vinocur, "François Fillon, Thatcherite with a Thing for Russia," *Politico*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/francois-fillon-thatcherite-with-a-thing-for-russia-juppe-france/>.

honest person.”¹⁶ And the Russian state-controlled media hailed the candidacy of Fillon, describing him as “the most pragmatic candidate in international politics” and suggesting that he “lived up to the expectations of the French people.”¹⁷

Le Pen was even friendlier towards Moscow. Already in 2011, she said she believed that “France should stop ‘bowing to America’s decisions’ and strengthen its ties with Russia instead,”¹⁸ and that if she came to power, she would make Russia “a privileged partner” of France.¹⁹ Le Pen justified the annexation of Crimea;²⁰ her advisor on international relations at that time, Aymeric Chauprade, even “observed” the so-called “referendum” on Crimea joining Russia in March 2014—and blamed the EU for the Russia-backed separatist activities in Eastern Ukraine.²¹ In 2014, her party obtained a €9.4 million loan from the First Czech-Russian Bank, a now defunct bank that at that time was owned by the structures of Gennadiy Timchenko, a major Russian businessman from Putin’s inner circle.²² Since 2014, Le Pen had consistently criticized the EU’s sanctions on Russia for the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine.²³

In the beginning of 2017, the “win-win” situation with the French presidential elections ended for Moscow: because of a corruption scandal, public support for Fillon dramatically decreased, and Emmanuel Macron replaced him as the presumptive winner of the presidential race. Macron, when still the Minister of Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs (2014-2016), did support the idea

of lifting the EU’s sanctions on Russia, but he insisted on the conditionality of the removal of the sanctions: “The objective we all share is to provide the lifting of sanctions by the summer, as far as the peace process in south-eastern Ukraine is respected,” Macron said in January 2016 during his trip to Moscow.²⁴ In Macron, the Kremlin seemed to anticipate the continuation of President François Hollande’s policies towards Putin’s Russia: maintaining a polite conversation with Moscow while remaining firm on the need for Russia to stop its aggression against Ukraine.

Before Macron’s rise, the Kremlin preferred not to interfere in the presidential elections in France, but when its preferred candidate’s popularity fell, Putin’s regime decided to attack Macron through media and cyber operations. Russian state-controlled RT and Sputnik propagated and amplified conspiracy theories about Macron,²⁵ while his team complained that their website and databases were subject to cyber-attacks originating from Russia.²⁶ Moreover, in March 2017, just one month before the first round of the presidential elections, the Kremlin invited Macron’s closest opponent, Marine Le Pen, to visit Moscow and meet with Putin. The political message was clear: the Kremlin had resigned itself to the failure of Fillon and presented Le Pen as its candidate in the French presidential elections. “We all know who Le Pen’s allies are: the regimes of Orban, Kaczynski, Putin. These aren’t regimes with an open and free democracy. Every day they break many democratic freedoms,” Macron said just days before his victory in the final stand-off between him and Le Pen.²⁷

Already, at the end of the presidential campaign, Macron’s team had denied press access to RT and Sputnik, “accusing them of spreading ‘propaganda’ and

16 “Russia Ready to Work with French Leadership to Restore Relations – Putin,” *Sputnik*, November 23, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201611231047755531-putin-work-france-president/>.

17 “Russia Hails Francois Fillon (as a Worried Germany Looks on),” *The Local*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.thelocal.fr/20161128/russian-media-hail-fillon-as-a-worried-germany-looks-on>.

18 “I Want to Free France from EU Straitjacket – Far-Right Party Leader,” *RT*, April 27, 2011, <https://www.rt.com/news/france-eu-immigrants-pen/>.

19 “Marine Le Pen veut aller en Russie,” *Le Figaro*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2011/05/02/97001-20110502FILWWW00503-marine-le-pen-veut-aller-en-russie.php>.

20 Tom Batchelor, “Marine Le Pen Insists Russian Annexation of Crimea Is Totally Legitimate,” *Independent*, January 3, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/marine-le-pen-crimea-russia-putin-ukraine-illegal-annexation-france-front-national-fn-a7507361.html>.

21 Anton Dolgunov, “Marin Le Pen: Evropa neset otvetstvennost’ za proiskhodyashchee na Ukraine,” *ITAR-TASS*, June 1, 2014, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1230269>.

22 Marine Turchi, “Le Front national décroche les millions russes,” *Mediapart*, November 22, 2014, www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/221114/le-front-national-decroche-les-millionsrusses; Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 197-198.

23 “France’s Marine Le Pen Urges End to Russia Sanctions,” *BBC*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39375969>.

24 “Macron in Moscow: France Wants Russia Sanctions Lifted by Mid-Year,” *RFI*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/economy/20160125-macron-moscow-france-wants-russia-sanctions-lifted-mid-year>.

25 “Dupont-Aignan soupçonne Macron de conflits d’intérêts et veut qu’il clarifie ‘ses financements,’” *RT*, February 11, 2017, <https://francais.rt.com/france/33829-dupontaignan-soupconne-macron-conflitsinterets-clarifie-financements>; “Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be ‘US Agent’ Lobbying Banks’ Interests,” *Sputnik*, February 4, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201702041050340451-macron-us-agent-dhuicq/>.

26 “France Condemns Alleged Russian Cyber Attacks Targeting Presidential Candidate Macron,” *France24*, February 19, 2017, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170219-francecondemns-cyberattacks-targeting-presidential-candidate-macron-points-russia>.

27 Lidia Kelly, “Poland Outraged after Macron Comments on Le Pen and Putin,” *Reuters*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-poland-outraged-after-macron-comments-on-le-pen-and-putin-idUSKBN17Y11E>.

'misleading information.'"28 Furthermore, at a press conference with Putin, who had arrived in Paris to meet with the newly elected president of France at the end of May 2017, Macron held his ground and reiterated that RT and Sputnik had behaved during the campaign not "as media organisations and journalists" but as "agencies of influence" and "lying propaganda."²⁹

At that time, the Russian attacks on Macron made him out to be "a Russia hawk."³⁰ In June 2018, the French edition of RT "received its first reprimand from the French regulator CSA (Conseil de Surveillance Audiovisuel) [...] for its biased coverage of the chemical attack in [Syrian] Douma in April 2018."³¹ At the end of the same year, France adopted a law on the "fight against the manipulation of information" that enabled "the transmission of foreign state controlled radio and television services that broadcast disinformation to be curtailed, or temporarily suspended, prior to key elections," and established "a new civil procedure by which a judicial order [could] be obtained requiring online communication providers to block further transmission of false information in the run-up to elections and referenda."³²

The Kremlin continued its political warfare against Macron and started building contacts with representatives of the radically anti-Macron Yellow Vest movement. The Kremlin engaged with them with the help of Leonid Slutsky, the chair of the Committee on International Affairs and president of the Russian Peace Foundation (RPF). In 2014, Slutsky had helped organize an illegitimate referendum in Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which was followed by its annexation by Russia, and for this he was sanctioned by Western countries. Since then, Slutsky had become one of the key operators of Russian political warfare in Europe. For example, it was Slutsky who officially invited Marine Le Pen to meet with Putin in

2017, and, in 2020, he was actively engaged in Russian malign influence operations in Italy and Serbia.³³ As revealed by *The Insider*, Slutsky's RPF issued special invitations for several French Yellow Vest members so they could visit Russia, allegedly to discuss RPF's "humanitarian and charitable programmes and projects."³⁴ Given the subversive nature of Slutsky's activities in Europe, it is viable to suggest that the Kremlin wanted to exert influence on the Yellow Vest movement with the aim of strengthening it and/or pushing particular narratives through its activists.

However, despite Russia's flirtations with the anti-Macron Yellow Vests and while remaining sceptical about Russian propaganda and disinformation, Macron increasingly adopted a Realpolitik approach towards Russia. Former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine (1997-2002) and former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin (2005-2007) played a crucial role in Macron's transformation from a Russia-sceptic to a politician who called for deeper cooperation with Russia despite the latter's non-compliance with international norms. In the summer of 2019, Macron declared: "Pushing Russia away from Europe is a profound strategic error, because we will push Russia either into an isolation that increases tensions or into alliances with other great powers such as China."³⁵ He did not suggest "to forget all our disagreements and to embrace each other again," but he still held that "the European continent [would] never be stable, [would] never be in security, if we [didn't] pacify and clarify our relations with Russia."³⁶

The Kremlin enthusiastically received Macron's Realpolitik turn towards Moscow, and, in August 2019, Putin visited Macron at the latter's summer retreat at the Brégançon Fort to discuss Ukraine and Syria. And yet, Moscow officially maintained its contacts with anti-Macron forces in France. On the 11th of November 2019, while in Paris, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova

28 "French Presidential Hopeful Macron Bans Russian-State Media from Campaign Trail," *France 24*, April 29, 2017, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170429-macron-campaign-drops-accreditation-kremlin-backed-media>.

29 "Video: Macron Slams RT, Sputnik News as 'Lying Propaganda' at Putin Press Conference," *France 24*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170530-macron-rt-sputnik-lying-propaganda-putin-versailles-russia-france-election>.

30 Ben Judah, "Emmanuel Macron's Foreign Policy Doctrine(s)," *Politico*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macrons-foreign-policy-doctrines/>.

31 Anastasia Kirilenko, "RT France and Sputnik's Attempts to Enhance French Society's Divisions," *The Kremlin's Influence Quarterly*, no. 2 (2020): 34-45 (39), <https://www.4freerussia.org/the-kremlin-s-influence-quarterly-2/>.

32 Rachael Craufurd Smith, "Fake News, French Law and Democratic Legitimacy: Lessons for the United Kingdom?," *Journal of Media Law*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2019): 52-81 (52).

33 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russian Malign Influence Operation in Coronavirus-hit Italy," *The Kremlin's Influence Quarterly*, no. 1 (2020): 8-16; Anton Shekhovtsov, "How to Fail a Malign Influence Operation: The Case of Russian Aid to Serbia," *The Kremlin's Influence Quarterly*, no. 2 (2020), 8-15.

34 "Khotim kak v Parizhe. Dokumenty podverdili kontakty rossiyskikh vlastey s 'zhelytymi zhiletami' i nemetskimi natsionalistami," *The Insider*, November 18, 2019, <https://theins.ru/politika/188244>.

35 Victor Mallet, James Shotter, Michael Peel, "Emmanuel Macron's Pivot to Russia Sparks EU Unease," *Financial Times*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/00ac54f4-d30f-11e9-8367-807ebd53ab77>.

36 "Keeping Russia out of Western Fold a 'Strategic Error', Macron Says in Key Speech," *France 24*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190827-france-macron-ambassadors-speech-new-economic-order-diplomacy-foreign-policy>.

held a meeting “with members of the French civil society,” as Zakharova described them.³⁷ Among them one could identify, among others, Martial Bild, a co-founder of the far-right Party of France who was also involved in launching the far-right, pro-Kremlin TV *Libertés*,³⁸ Olivier Berruyer, a blogger and regular commentator for RT;³⁹ Bertrand Pillet, who runs the ThinkerView YouTube channel that regularly hosts far-right and far-left activists, as well as conspiracy theorists and Eurosceptics; and Dimitri de Kochko, a co-founder of the Union of Russophones of France and a regular commentator for the French edition of the Russian state-controlled Sputnik website.

There is naturally nothing new in the Kremlin’s double game of striving to have a high-profile dialogue with the leaders of European countries and yet keeping communication lines open with anti-system actors aiming to undermine that very leadership. And this double game is exactly the background that provides insight into the Kremlin’s behaviour towards Paris in the wake of Samuel Paty’s brutal murder by a Russian Islamist.

THE KREMLIN’S DOUBLE GAME

For most of 2020, which was dramatically affected by the coronavirus pandemic, relations between Moscow and Paris remained positively neutral. However, the Kremlin disrupted the balance with the poisoning of major opposition figure Alexei Navalny on the August 20, 2020. Two days later, Navalny was evacuated to Germany, where specialists established that Navalny had been poisoned by a Novichok nerve agent. Navalny survived, but the West was shocked by the attempt on his life: not only was it an outrageous act aimed at silencing the leading Russian critic of Putin’s regime, but the use of the nerve agent against a political opponent was also a clear violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention signed and ratified by the overwhelming majority of the world’s countries, including Russia. Because of these considerations, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas called on Russia to “urgently clarif[y] in full the facts and responsibili-

37 “In Paris, FM Sergey #Lavrov Met with Members of the French Civil Society,” Facebook (social media), November 11, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/MIDRussia/posts/2090333797732717>.

38 Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, 146-147.

39 Anastasia Kirilenko, “Advokaty d’yavola. Kak Kreml’ zadeystvoval svoyu set’ vo Frantsii, dokazyvaya v sude, chto kremlyovskoy seti vo Frantsii net,” *The Insider*, March 15, 2019, <https://theinsider.ru/antifake/147120>.

ties behind this assassination attempt on a member of the Russian political opposition using a military-grade nerve agent that belongs to a group of agents developed by Russia.”⁴⁰

As could have been expected, the Kremlin denied any responsibility for the poisoning of Navalny. On October 6, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed the conclusions of the German experts who said that the Russian opposition activist had been poisoned by a Novichok nerve agent.⁴¹ The next day, Le Drian and Maas issued yet another joint statement saying that there was “no other plausible explanation for Mr. Navalny’s poisoning than a Russian involvement and responsibility,” adding that France and Germany would “share with European partners proposals for additional sanctions” targeting “individuals deemed responsible for this crime and breach of international norms.”⁴² Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova responded to the statement accusing France and Germany of “heading the anti-Russian coalition” allegedly taking shape in the EU “contrary to the earlier statements by Paris and Berlin on their commitment to partnership with Russia.”⁴³ Zakharova finished her response to the statement of Le Drian and Maas by saying that Russia did not “consider it possible to conduct ‘business as usual’ with Berlin and Paris.”⁴⁴

The EU and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on top Russian officials and a number of Russian entities on the 15th of October 2020. The EU determined that Navalny had been poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent, and, since that toxic agent was “accessible only to State authorities in the Russian Federation,” it was “reasonable

40 “Joint Communiqué by the Foreign Ministers of France and Germany (4 Sept. 2020),” Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères (website), September 4, 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/russia/news/article/alexei-navalny-joint-communique-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-france-and-germany>.

41 “OPCW Issues Report on Technical Assistance Requested by Germany,” Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (website), October 6, 2020, <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2020/10/opcw-issues-report-technical-assistance-requested-germany>.

42 “Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of France and Germany – Alexei Navalny (7 October 2020),” Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères (website), September 7, 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/russia/news/article/joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-france-and-germany-alexei-navalny>.

43 “Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the Joint Statement by the French and German Foreign Ministers on the Situation with Alexey Navalny,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (website), October 7, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4372528.

44 “Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.”

to conclude that the poisoning of Alexei Navalny was only possible with the consent of the [Russian] Presidential Executive Office."⁴⁵

The following day, Samuel Paty was murdered in an Islamist terror attack in a suburb of Paris. It would be a paranoid fantasy to suggest that there was any connection between the EU's sanctions and Paty's murder. However, the introduction of the new sanctions against Putin's regime may help explain the nature of the double game that the Kremlin started in relation to Macron.

The official Russian reaction was unambiguous. Putin called Macron on October 20; he "expressed his condolences in connection with the terrorist act – the barbaric murder of a French teacher," and both reportedly reaffirmed "mutual interest in stepping up cooperation to combat terrorism and the spread of extremist ideology."⁴⁶ A few days earlier, the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov, who calls himself Putin's "foot soldier,"⁴⁷ had condemned the terrorist attack in France and offered condolences to the relatives of the murdered teacher.⁴⁸ Kadyrov also called on the French authorities "not to provoke the faithful, [and] not to hurt their religious feelings."⁴⁹ And, importantly, Kadyrov essentially disowned Abdoullakh Anzorov as a Chechen, saying that the latter had lived almost his entire life in France, spoke French, and had visited Chechnya only once, at the age of two.⁵⁰ For a person who—since at least 2010—had insisted that he was the national leader of all Chechens no matter whether they lived, in Chechnya or anywhere else in the world,⁵¹ the disownment of Anzorov as a co-ethnic implied an even deeper denunciation than Kadyrov's official condemnation of the terrorist attack.

But already, in some Chechen circles, some were condoning Anzorov's terror attack. In his Instagram post, Chechen MMA fighter Zelim Imadaev called Anzorov "a

hero of Islam" and asked Allah to approve of his jihad.⁵² Yet another Chechen MMA fighter, Albert Duraev, noted in his Instagram account that "freedom of speech lost its origin in France," adding a laughing emoji to his post.⁵³

By the end of October, Chechen leadership had changed its positions with regard to the terrorist attack in France. Using the Instagram account of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Chechnya, Salakh-Khadzhi Mezhiev, a mufti and advisor to Kadyrov, started spreading disinformation about Macron, claiming that the French president was having Muhammad cartoons posted on all government buildings in France.⁵⁴ Reacting to this made-up story, Mezhiev called Macron "the number one terrorist in the world," "the most degraded creature," "the enemy of the humankind," and "the enemy of all Muslims."⁵⁵ There was an ideological angle to Mezhiev's hateful attack on Macron too, as the mufti also talked about "genuine terrorism and extremism cultivated on the Western pseudo-values of multi-liberalism [sic] and all-permissiveness."⁵⁶ And by making the "insane professor" a national hero, France, Mezhiev claimed, "deliberately incited Muslims to provocative actions."⁵⁷

Mezhiev's words were almost immediately echoed by Kadyrov. He wrote that the murdered teacher was himself responsible for what happened, because he "provoked pupils."⁵⁸ If Anzorov was a terrorist, Kadyrov argued, then Macron was much worse: "the leader and encourager of terrorism."⁵⁹

The new approach to the terrorist attack offered by Mezhiev and Kadyrov became the main narrative of the entire story in Chechnya: Paty had it coming, his murder was not a terrorist attack but a result of provocation, Macron is a terrorist himself.

Moreover, a similar narrative was being pushed by Dmitry Kiselyov, a major Russian propagandist and the

45 *Official Journal of the European Union*, vol. 63, October 15, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2020:341:FULL&from=EN>.

46 "Telephone Conversation with President of France Emmanuel Macron," President of Russia (website), October 20, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64249>.

47 Andrew Osborn, Dmitry Solovyov, "Chechen Leader, amid Reshuffles, Says Ready to Die for Putin," *Reuters*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-chechnya-idUSKBN1DR031>.

48 "Dorogie druz'ya!," Telegram (social media), October 17, 2020, https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/1008.

49 "Dorogie druz'ya!"

50 "Dorogie druz'ya!"

51 Elena Milashina, "Khozyain chechentsev," *Novaya gazeta*, July 28, 2019, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/07/28/81403-hozyain-chechentsev>.

52 Karim Zidan, "Former UFC Fighter Praises Chechen Teen who Beheaded French Teacher," *Bloody Elbow*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2020/10/19/21523149/ufc-fighter-praises-chechen-teen-beheaded-french-teacher-decapitation-prophet-mma-news>.

53 Zidan, "Former UFC Fighter Praises Chechen Teen."

54 "Sovetnik Glavy ChR, Muftiy Chechenskoy Respubliki Salakh-Khadzhi Mezhiev vystupil s zavavleniem," Instagram (social media), October 26, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CG01-pPF4vO/>.

55 "Sovetnik Glavy ChR, Muftiy Chechenskoy Respubliki Salakh-Khadzhi Mezhiev."

56 "Sovetnik Glavy ChR, Muftiy Chechenskoy Respubliki Salakh-Khadzhi Mezhiev."

57 "Sovetnik Glavy ChR, Muftiy Chechenskoy Respubliki Salakh-Khadzhi Mezhiev."

58 "Frantsuzskie vlasti podderzhivayut publikatsii karikatur na Proroka Mukhammada," Telegram (social media), October 27, 2020, https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/1010.

59 "Frantsuzskie vlasti podderzhivayut publikatsii."

head the Russian government-owned international news agency “Rossiya Segodnya.” Kiselyov had been sanctioned by the EU in 2014 for his participation in the information warfare against Ukraine. During a TV program that he anchored (after the Islamist attack in Nice on October 29), Kiselyov claimed that France was “descending into a religious war,” and that the state itself was “pitting the majority of its citizens and law enforcement against Muslims.”⁶⁰ And while he talked about “the soul-chilling brutality and massacre of the innocent,” he still referred to them as “desperate resistance of the Muslims” to the allegedly repressive state actions that he himself fabricated.⁶¹ Kiselyov’s message was clear: the West in general hated traditional values, was on the brink of collapse, and could not serve as an ideological inspiration for Russia.

Furthermore, Kadyrov made a U-turn on disownment of Anzorov as a Chechen: he allowed the body of the terrorist to be transported from France to Chechnya and buried in the Shalazhi village where his relatives lived. The clear message was that Kadyrov claimed Anzorov as one of his own: he was no longer a person who had lived his entire life in France; he was, first and foremost, a Chechen. At the same time, the re-owning of Anzorov as a Chechen through his burial in Chechnya was a violation of the Russians’ own tradition with regard to the terrorists: in Russia (including Chechnya), bodies of killed terrorists are never given to their relatives.

Dozens of police officers secured Shalazhi; only residents were allowed to enter the village during the funeral and reception, and only around 200 hundred people were allowed to take part in the ceremony.⁶² After the funeral, which some media described as a funeral “with honors,”⁶³ the Chechen State Television and Radio Company “Grozny” aired a report that reiterated Kadyrov’s narrative of the terrorist attack. The report, referencing his relatives, called Anzorov “a god-fearing young man who was not known for any aggressiveness” and claimed that the “incident” (i.e. the murder of Paty) would not have taken place if not for the “overt Islamophobic

provocation and pressure on religious feelings.”⁶⁴

It was after the funeral that the head of the Shalazhi village called Anzorov “a hero for the entire Islamic world.”⁶⁵ And on the 18th of December, around 50 horseback riders performed a *ziyarat* (a pilgrimage to holy sites in Islam) to Anzorov’s grave. As they reached it, they said a prayer asking Allah to accept Anzorov’s *ghazwa*, i.e. a military *jihād* against infidels.⁶⁶

KADYROV AS AN INSTRUMENT OF THE KREMLIN’S POLITICAL WAR

There is little doubt that following Kadyrov’s U-turn on Anzorov and the latter’s burial in Chechnya, the “Grozny” report on the funeral and the glorification of his actions was not simply tolerated but directly sanctioned by Kadyrov or his inner circle.⁶⁷ The leadership in Chechnya—described as “a black hole in the Council of Europe’s human rights protection system”⁶⁸—is even more authoritarian than Putin’s regime, and no significant development in Chechnya (apart from sporadic terrorist activities) can happen without approval from Kadyrov’s circles.

Kadyrov’s departure from a more moderate position on Anzorov’s terrorist attack, which was generally compliant with the Kremlin’s official position, can be explained by a combination of several factors.

First, the praise of Anzorov was a continuation of Kadyrov’s fight against Western secularism. For example, shortly after the Islamist terror attack on the office of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, which left 12 people dead, Kadyrov organized a demonstration of hundreds of thousands of people against the newspaper in Chechnya’s capital Grozny—a demonstration that

64 Aleksandr Baklanov, “Telekanal ‘Grozny’ vypustil syuzhet o pokhoronakh 18-letnego chechentsa, obezglavivshego uchitelya pod Parizhem. I nazval ubiytsu zhertvoy provokatsii,” *Meduza*, December 8, 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/12/08/telekanal-groznyy-vypustil-syuzhet-o-pokhoronah-18-letnego-chechentsa-obezglavivshego-uchitelya-pod-parizhem-i-nazval-ubiytsu-zhertvoy-provokatsii>.

65 “‘Kakie pochesti?’”

66 “Pol’zovateli sotsseti odobrili konny pokhod k mogile Anzorova v Chechne,” *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/357839/>.

67 Amina Zakaeva, Semen Charny, “Opravdanie Anzorova v syuzhete ChGTRK ‘Grozny’ pokazalo neposledovatel’nost’ Kadyrova,” *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/357382/>.

68 “No Justice in Sight for Grave Crimes in Chechnya,” European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (website), <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/no-justice-in-sight-for-grave-crimes-in-chechnya/>.

60 Yuri Bershidskiy, “Feyk Dmitriya Kiseniyova: Zapad provotsiruet religioznuyu voynu protiv musul’man,” *The Insider*, November 3, 2020, <https://theins.ru/antifake/236555>.

61 Bershidskiy, “Feyk Dmitriya Kiseniyova.”

62 Benoît Vitkine, “Le terroriste qui a assassiné Samuel Paty enterré en Tchétchénie,” *Le Monde*, December 8, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/12/08/attentat-de-conflans-sainte-honorine-l-assassin-de-samuel-paty-enterré-en-tchetchenie_6062554_3224.html.

63 “Chechen Who Beheaded French Teacher Buried on Home Soil – Reports,” *The Moscow Times*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/12/07/chechen-who-beheaded-french-teacher-buried-on-home-soil-reports-a72252>.

pushed pro-Muslim and anti-Western narratives.⁶⁹

Second, Kadyrov aspires to be recognized as a major defender of Islam, and as the leaders of important Muslim countries such as Turkey and Iran harshly attacked Macron for his intentions to combat radical Islam,⁷⁰ Kadyrov's radicalized move was about joining the front of other major self-proclaimed defenders of Islam.

Third, by sanctioning Islamist actions normalizing or even glorifying Anzorov and his terror attack, Kadyrov allows Chechen Islamists "to let off steam"⁷¹ and express their radical sentiments in a controlled environment created by the Chechen leadership to contain Islamism.

Fourth, Kadyrov positions himself as the leader of all Chechens wherever they live, and the re-owning of Anzorov as a Chechen sent a double message to the Chechen diaspora in Europe and elsewhere: on the one hand, whatever you do, whatever crime you commit, we will always support you (unless your crime was against Russian leadership or Kadyrov); on the other hand, we own you, so you should behave and never try to undermine Kadyrov's authority.⁷²

The Kremlin never strayed from its official unambiguous condemnation of the terror attack. Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov even publicly distanced himself twice from Kadyrov's statements. In one instance, Peskov, commenting on Kadyrov's anti-Macron attack, said that Russian regional leaders cannot engage in or shape foreign policy, and that one should keep the line formulated by the president.⁷³ In another instance, Peskov, when asked about the above-mentioned report on Anzorov's funeral on the Chechen "Grozny" TV channel, said that the report did not correlate with the Kremlin's position, while defending the alleged pluralism of the Russian state-controlled media.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, the Kremlin, if it did not directly *authorize*, then, at the very least, *permitted* Kadyrov and his circles, as well as propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov, to voice a radically different position on the same case on Samuel Paty's murder. This can also be explained by two major considerations.

First, the Kremlin, which was initially pleased with Macron's Realpolitik turn, was deeply disaffected when France took a leading role in the introduction of the EU sanctions in response to the poisoning of Navalny by the Russian security services. Kadyrov thus became an element of Moscow's double game in relation to Macron. As argued above, this game consists of maintaining a dialogue with Western leaders while simultaneously keeping open communication lines with anti-system and anti-establishment actors. In the case of Anzorov's Islamist terror attack, Putin's regime supported Macron and yet empowered, through Kadyrov and others, the Islamist opposition to Macron as part of the Kremlin's political warfare against France.

Second, as Ivan Preobrazhensky insightfully noted, against the background of the rise of anti-Macron sentiments in many Muslim countries, with Turkish President Recep Erdoğan effectively becoming the leader of the anti-French front, Putin's regime could not afford further consolidation of Erdoğan's regional authority.⁷⁵ Kadyrov's entry into this front erodes Erdoğan's claims to political leadership of the Islamic world. (The Kremlin naturally does not allow Kadyrov to criticize China for the genocide of Uyghur Muslims—and Kadyrov knows perfectly well his limits as a self-proclaimed defender of Islam—but the rhetoric aimed at radicalizing Muslims and inciting them against Macron and French liberal democracy does fit into Moscow's subversive agenda in Europe.)

69 "Up to 800,000 Chechens Protest over Cartoons of Prophet Muhammad," *Guardian*, January 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/19/chechens-protest-cartoons-prophet-muhammad-charlie-hebdo>.

70 Michael Safi, Redwan Ahmed, Akhtar Mohammad Makoi, Shah Meer Baloch, "Anger towards Emmanuel Macron Grows in Muslim World," *Guardian*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/28/anger-towards-emmanuel-macron-grows-in-muslim-world>.

71 Interview with Pavel Luzin, an expert on Russian politics conducted via Skype on the 10th of December 2020.

72 Interview with Pavel Luzin.

73 "Peskov predlozhit sledit' vo vneshney politike za slovami Putina, a ne Kadyrova," *Interfax*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/734545>.

74 "Peskov ne soglasilsya s TV Chechni v otsenke deystviy ubitsy uchitel'ya Pati," *Interfax*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/740383>.

75 Kommentariy: Kadyrov – golos iz RF v islamskom internatsionalnoy protiv Makrona," *Deutsche Welle*, October 28, 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3kXl5>.

CONCLUSION

At the moment, it seems impossible to establish whether Kadyrov's attack on Macron was authorized or simply permitted by the Kremlin. Staying on the safe side and assuming the latter is true, Kadyrov's anti-French rhetoric and apologetic stance towards the perpetrator of the terror attack seems to be shaped by political, personal, and tactical concerns. Kadyrov is illiberal and attacked French liberalism; he lays claim for leadership in the Islamic world and joined other leaders in attacking "Islamophobic" Macron; he diverts radical Islamist sentiments in Chechnya to a foreign power; and he strengthens his authority among the Chechens worldwide by defending the terrorist just because of his Chechen origin.

Regardless of which concerns are more important to Kadyrov, the Kremlin benefits from his attacks against Macron and France. On the one hand, by empowering Islamists in France, Kadyrov contributes to religious polarization and undermines social cohesion in France, which, despite Macron's discovered Realpolitik approach to Putin's Russia, still takes principled stands with regard to the Kremlin and its violations of international agreements such as the Chemical Weapons Convention. On the other hand, Kadyrov helps Moscow covertly fight another political war, with Istanbul, consolidating its positions in the region and competing with Moscow in different areas.

Focusing on the Kremlin's use of Kadyrov as an instrument of its political warfare against France, it must be said that while not all Chechens living in Europe in general and France in particular are supportive of Kadyrov (and, as demonstrated earlier, official Chechen organizations in Europe unambiguously condemned the terror attack), Chechen youth in Europe is susceptible to his illiberal propaganda.⁷⁶ And as his attacks on Macron and French secularism continue, they pose a clear security threat to French society.

76 Anastasia Kirilenko, "Propaganda Kadyrova povliyala na radikalizatsiyu chechenskoy molodezhi v Evrope," *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/355564/>.



RUSSIAN INFLUENCE ON THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2020 IN GEORGIA

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POLITICS



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“DREAM” WINS AGAIN BUT REMAINS “UNDER SUSPICION”

Regular parliamentary elections were held in Georgia on October 31, 2020. As expected,¹ Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream retained its leading position with 48.22 percent of the vote. The United National Movement (UNM), Mikheil Saakashvili's party, came out of the race with 27.18 percent. Eight more opposition parties did not manage to garner even 4 percent of voters' support. These are "European Georgia" (3.79 percent), "Lelo for Georgia" (3.15 percent), "Agmashenebeli's Strategy" (3.15 percent), "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia" (APG) (3.14 percent), Girchi (2.89 percent), Aleko Elisashvili – Citizens (1.33 percent), Labor Party (1 percent)² and United Georgia – Democratic Movement (0.85 percent).³ Although almost all of these parties were eligible for parliamentary mandates (the electoral threshold was set at 1 percent), they refused to recognize the election results and declared a boycott of the new parliament of the 10th convocation, demanding the dissolution of the current composition of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and an early re-election.⁴ Mass pro-

1 Kseniya Sigaeva, "Gruzinskaya mechta' okazalas' real'nee ozhidaniy" [Georgian Dream had turned out to be more real than it was expected], RBC, October 30, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2020/11/02/5f9bfdc79a79477898618671>

2 "CEC Summarizes Proportional, Majoritarian MP Election Results", Civil.ge, November 14, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/382334>

3 "100% Counted: GD – 48.15%, UNM – 27.14%, EG – 3.78%", Civil.ge, November 1, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/379692>

4 "All Opposition Parties Refuse to Enter Next Parliament," Civil.ge, November 2, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/380014>

tests took place outside the parliament and CEC buildings in Tbilisi, marked by clashes with the police.

By November 10, 2020, the participants of the electoral campaign and observer organizations had filed a total of 1,272 complaints with the CEC, resulting in a recount at 39 polling stations. In the majority of cases, however, the information was only "refined," with the overall results unchanged, according to the Georgian CEC. Neither the President of Georgia, Salome Zurbishvili, nor the representatives of the ruling party recognized the elections as rigged. The USA agreed with this position as well, based on international organizations' reports.⁵ Parliament Speaker of the 9th convocation Archil Talakvadze considers the consolidated boycott of the second round of elections by the opposition (it took place in 17 out of 30 single-mandate districts, and the majority of MPs, 120 individuals, were elected under the one-man, one-vote rule) nothing more than a game "in Russia's interests."⁶

Mutual accusations of pro-Russian actions by both the ruling party and its opponents are a common theme in Georgian political discourse. An overview of the Georgian-language social media held between June and August 2020 by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) found that accusations of cooperation with the Kremlin were put forward against both the ruling party and opposition

5 "U.S. Embassy Statement on Georgia's Parliamentary Elections," U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi, November 1, 2020, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-statement-on-georgias-parliamentary-elections/>

6 "Georgia Election Live Blog: Nika Melia's Campaign Office Attacked," Civil.ge, November 16, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/363949>

ones, including political forces with vast ideological differences, such as Mikheil Saakashvili's UNM and the APG.⁷ ISFED concluded that Georgian-language social media are increasingly used for political defamation and misinformation, involving Russian organizations among other actors. For example, in April 2020, Facebook deleted accounts operated by the Russian organizations News Front and Sputnik as inciting internal conflicts in Georgian society.⁸

The ISFED report shows that the Georgian Dream and the government were targets of the majority of the defamatory posts published between June and August 2020 (5,593 posts).⁹ The main targets of criticism were party leader Bidzina Ivanishvili, Tbilisi Mayor and Chief Secretary of the Georgian Dream Kakha Kaladze, Executive Secretary Irakli Kobakhidze, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Justice Minister Tea Tsulukani.

Ivanishvili was often portrayed in such posts as a pro-Russian politician interested in «Georgia without Georgians» and one who encourages emigration from the country.¹⁰ Nor did opposition representatives shy away from accusing Ivanishvili of acting in Russian interests while ostensibly declaring a pro-Western and democratic vector. According to Khatia Dekanoidze, a member of the United National Movement, Ivanishvili is responsible for the increasing Russian influence in Georgia, with the effect of aggravating poverty.¹¹

Recall as well the sensational interview with former president of Cartu Group and Ivanishvili's chief of security Eldar Gogoladze, which came out on Mtavari Channel six days before the election.¹² In the interview, which went on for an hour and a half, Gogoladze, who had worked with Ivanishvili for five years before quitting in 2004, mentioned the Russian origin of Ivanishvili's

wealth, which had already been covered by the media—e.g. his direct participation in the development of major Russian companies, such as Roscredit Bank,¹³ Rosmetalinvest, and Gazprom.¹⁴ One of most scandalous stories allegedly involving Ivanishvili, according to Gogoladze, was the illegal arms trade during the civil war in Angola.¹⁵

According to Gogoladze, Ivanishvili had experience in Russian political campaigns—he had worked on the promotion of general Alexander Lebed during the 1996 presidential election. In fact, Boris Ivanishvili (probably a Russified version of the Georgian name Bidzina) was then awarded the gratitude of President Boris Yeltsin «for active participation in organizing and conducting the election campaign.»¹⁶ The connection between Lebed and Ivanishvili, which Gogoladze emphasized, evokes a very specific sentiment in the Georgian context: Alexander Lebed—at the time, the commander of the 106th airborne division of the Soviet troops—participated in the brutal dispersal of a peaceful protest (the so-called Tbilisi massacre) on April 9, 1989, in Tbilisi, where people were killed.¹⁷

Gogoladze also claimed that another notorious figure in Russian politics, Vladislav Surkov, was directly related to Ivanishvili's involvement in politics: Surkov allegedly persuaded him to run for president of Georgia shortly after the 2003 Revolution of Roses.¹⁸

Surkov's name first emerged in the Georgian political context in 2013, when he was appointed assistant to President Vladimir Putin on relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁹ This period overlaps with Ivanishvili's leadership of Georgia as prime minister (from October 2012 to November 2013).

Specifics about the “relationship” between Surkov's department and Abkhazia/South Ossetia surfaced in the global information space in 2016 thanks to Ukrai-

7 “Social Media Monitoring: 2020 Parliamentary Elections. First Interim Report,” International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, October 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tsqalCMP6yMlwJhabEy49Es2cDhCDit8/view>

8 “Social Media Monitoring”, p.1, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tsqalCMP6yMlwJhabEy49Es2cDhCDit8/view>

9 “Social Media Monitoring”, p.4, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tsqalCMP6yMlwJhabEy49Es2cDhCDit8/view>

10 “Social Media Monitoring”, p.33, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tsqalCMP6yMlwJhabEy49Es2cDhCDit8/view>

11 Sophiko Megreidze, “Georgia's ruling party claims victory in parliamentary vote,” Apnews.com, October 31, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-ukraine-georgia-tbilisi-elections-df12d18874f6bcb05ce1e0e025d98fca7>

12 “Rossiyskie svyazi, moshennichestvo, Angolageyt-put' Ivanishvili k milliarderstvu” [Russian capital, fraud, Angola gate: Ivanishvili's way to billions], Grusia Online, October 26, 2020, <https://www.apсны.ge/2020/pol/1603759449.php>

13 “Rossiyskie svyazi, moshennichestvo, Angolageyt-put' Ivanishvili k milliarderstvu.”

14 “Ruling party head's former security chief in tell-all TV interview,” JamNews, October 26, 2020, <https://jam-news.net/interview-with-nika-gvaramia-former-head-of-the-security-service-bidzina-ivanishvili/>

15 “Rossiyskie svyazi, moshennichestvo, Angolageyt-put' Ivanishvili k milliarderstvu,” 2020

16 “Rasporyazhenie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 25.07.1996 g. № 396-rp” [Russian Federation President Decree as of 25.07.1996 № 396-rp], President of Russia, July 25, 1996, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/9795>

17 Georgij Dvali, “Nachalo gruzinskoy ery” [The Beginning of Georgian Era], Kommersant, April 6, 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3933415#id1176623>

18 “Former Cartu Group Official Talks Ivanishvili's Past,” Civil.ge, October 28, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/377682>

19 “Vladislav Surkov: a Profile,” Polit.ru, September 21, 2020, <https://polit.ru/news/2020/09/21/surkov/>

nian hackers from “Cyberjunta,” who hacked the work email of the Surkov team. Dated 2013-2014, the e-mails contained a description of investment projects that the Kremlin planned to carry out in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the fields of oil production, power generation, construction, and other strategic industries with the involvement of the largest Russian companies: Rosneft, Inter RAO, Rosatom, and others. In addition to projects on the economic «development» of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the files of Surkov’s department included dossiers on key persons in Abkhazia, including avenues for individual approaches and personal motives conducive to «cooperation.»²⁰

The implementation of these plans manifested itself through the significant Russian investments into Abkhazia, which reached about RUR 3.24 billion in 2018-2019, and RUR 2.9 billion in 2015-2016.²¹ In July 2019, Surkov came to Abkhazia to discuss investment programs for 2020-2022 with the then-president of the unrecognized republic, Raul Khajimba. In August of the same year, Khajimba met with Vladimir Putin in Sochi. Presidential elections in Abkhazia were scheduled for September 8, 2019, and Moscow supported Khajimba.²²

Meanwhile, director of the Alania Inform agency Yuri Beteyev believes that Surkov’s department in Abkhazia was not really successful. According to him, Moscow did not control the events in the unrecognized republic,²³ as evidenced by the early resignation of Khajimba in Jan-

uary 2020 under pressure from the opposition.²⁴

Surkov himself also resigned in January 2020. While some analysts believe that Moscow took a neutral stance towards Abkhazia’s political choice (when opposition leader Aslan Bzhania won at the preterm presidential elections in March 2020),²⁵ Surkov’s resignation immediately after the mass unrest may be evidence of the failure of the “Caucasus scenario.”²⁶ It should be noted that Georgia does not consider the elections in Abkhazia legitimate.²⁷

Even though Gogoladze gave some remarkable examples of Bidzina Ivanishvili’s relations with the political and economic establishment of Moscow in his interview, allies of the Georgian Dream leader consider this interview to be nothing more than a hostile provocation organized by pro-Russian opposition—the “former high-profile KGB officer Gogoladze”²⁸—and the TV company supporting the now-disgraced Mikheil Saakashvili.

Gogoladze, who used to be a bodyguard of Georgian president Eduard Shevarnadze, is mentioned in the still-unsolved 1993 murder of high-ranking CIA officer Freddie Russell Woodruff.²⁹ However, no evidence of current cooperation between Gogoladze and the Kremlin has yet been published.

20 “Abhaziya v delovoy perepiske Surkova” [Abkhazia in Surkov’s correspondence], SOVA, October 28, 2016, <https://sova.news/2016/10/28/abhaziya-v-delovoj-perepiske-surkova/>

21 “Kreml’ pereklyuchilsya na dialog s abkhazskoy oppozitsiei na fone otstavki Hadzhimby” [Kremlin has switched over to the dialogue with the opposition in the context with Khadzhimba’s resignation], Kavkazsky Uzel, January 13, 2020, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/344608/>

22 “Kreml’ pereklyuchilsya,” 2020

23 “Sozdatel’ psevdoreal’nostey: chem zanimalysya Surkov v Abhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii” [A creator of quasi-realities: what Surkov has done in Abkhazia and South Ossetia], EurAsia Daily, January 25, 2020, <https://easdaily.com/ru/news/2020/01/25/sozdatel-psevdorealnostey-chem-zanimalysya-surkov-v-abhazii-i-yuzhnoy-osetii>

24 Based on the results of the presidential election in the unrecognized republic of Abkhazia on September 8, 2019, the incumbent leader Raul Khajimba won. His rival in the second round, Alkhas Kvitsinia, filed a lawsuit, which the court granted amid the seizure of the presidential administration building by protesters. On March 22, 2020, pre-term presidential elections were held in Abkhazia. Former head of the State Security Service and opposition leader Aslan Bzhania won. The elections were held without Russian observers (whose absence was justified by the safety measures in the situation of the coronavirus epidemic), however, polling stations were organized in two Russian cities, Moscow and Cherkessk. “Glavnoe o dosrochnykh vyborakh prezidenta Abkhazii-2020” [Key facts about the pre-term Presidential Election in Abkhazia], Kavkazsky Uzel, March 25, 2020, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/347342/25> “Prezident Abkhazii Raul’ Hadzhimba ushel v otstavku pod davleniem oppozitsii” [Abkhaz President has resigned because of the opposition], BBC news, January 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-51085615>

26 “Sozdatel’ psevdoreal’nostey,” 2020

27 “Repeat Polls’ in Occupied Abkhazia Slated for March 22,” Civil.ge, January 12, 2020, <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/334314>

28 “Ruling party head’s former security chief in tell-all TV interview,” 2020

29 “‘Fatal shot came from within car’: Georgian security chief suspended”, Independent, August 12, 1992, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/fatal-shot-came-from-within-car-georgian-security-chief-suspended-1460582.html>; “Delo ob ubiyestve v Gruzii sotrudnika CRU mozhet byt’ peresmotreno” [The case of CIA officer murder in Georgia could be revised], Pravo, April 24, 2004, <https://pravo.ua/delo-ob-ubiyestve-v-gruzii-sotrudnika-c/>

KREMLIN TECHNOLOGIES IN THE PATRIOTS' CAMPAIGN

On August 24 and 31, 2020, the Dossier Center ("Dossier"), a non-commercial project of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published several reports on the participation of Russian structures in the election campaign of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) party. According to Dossier, the campaign was overseen by well-known Kremlin political strategist Sergei Mikheev (persona non grata in the EU from 2014 to 2017) representing the Moscow PR company POLITSECRETS. Mikheev himself was controlled by retired FSB Colonel Valery Maksimov and officer of the Russian Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces Valery Chernyshov—both subordinates Vladimir Chernov, the Russian General of the Foreign Intelligence Service and Head of the Presidential Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries Vladimir.

The documents presented by Dossier include a detailed plan of the APG's election campaign: items to be discussed in speeches, topics of rallies, the content of election videos, an action plan, correspondence with the head of POLITSECRETS Vera Blashenkova, as well as a cost sheet for the entire "project." According to the latter, the costs amounted to USD 8,430,625; another USD 700,000 was used to pay political strategists.³⁰

There is little information openly available about political consultant Vera Blashenkova and the POLITSECRETS company: one can find brief mentions of her successful work in "turnkey election campaigns" in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, her experience as a branding "coach" and consultant, and her authorship of books on management psychology.³¹ Before the publication of Dossier's files, Blashenkova's name never emerged in conversations about Kremlin political projects, and her work with the APG largely looks like a standard PR project with run-of-the-mill strategies for opponent defamation, engagement of the potential constituency, generating media publicity, etc.

As shown in project "manuals" published by Dossier, the Kremlin mentors suggested building the AGP's rhetorical content on societal fears of losing traditional

Georgian values and of Turkish economic and religious expansion, as well as on hopes of restoring Georgian territorial integrity.

These hopes and fears are shared by a significant portion of Georgian society and can indeed be used for political manipulation.³² For several years now, the APG has consistently promoted such narratives, including during the 2020 parliamentary campaign.³³

In some cases, APG members obediently followed recommendations from the Kremlin manuals. This was the case with Irma Inashvili and Georgy Lomiya's trip to Abkhazia in August 2020 with the "humanitarian" purpose of handing over an icon to the Ilori Cathedral,³⁴ a visit organized, as admitted by both the APG and Abkhazian authorities, with the support of Russian "friends."³⁵ The trip led to an uproar both in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, and the assistant of Abkhazia "president" Lasha Sakania, who had organized the visit, had to resign.³⁶ The so-called Abkhazian Church gave the icon back, saying it could not communicate with Georgians who did not recognize its autonomy and wanted to speak with Abkhazia in *vanche* terms.³⁷

According to Georgian analysts, the APG leaders' trip to Abkhazia was a Kremlin sabotage aimed at preventing direct negotiations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.³⁸ The new leader of the unrecognized republic, Aslan Bzhania, was not a Moscow protégé and was inclined to

32 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Sopho Gelava, "Anti-Western Propaganda 2019," Media Development Foundation (MDF), 2020, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/173/file/eng/AntiWest-Booklet-ENG.pdf>

33 Kintsurashvili, Gelava, "Anti-Western Propaganda 2019."

34 "Irma Inashvili podtverdila svoj vizit v okkupirovannuyu Abkhaziju" [Irma Inashvili has confirmed her visit to occupied Abkhazia], SOVA, August 24, 2020, <https://sova.news/2020/08/24/irma-inashvili-podtverdila-svoj-vizit-v-okkupirovannuyu-abkhaziju/>

35 "Pomoshnik de-fakto prezidenta Abkhazii vse zhe provel 'bogougodnyuyu' vstrechu s chlenami 'Al'yansa patriotov Gruzii'" [Assistant of Abkhazia's de-facto President has convened a godly meeting with members of the "Alliance of Patriots], SOVA, August 24, 2020, <https://sova.news/2020/08/24/pomoshnik-de-fakto-prezidenta-abkhazii-vse-zhe-provel-bogougodnyuyu-vstrechu-s-chlenami-alyansa-patriotov-gruzii/>; "Upravlyaemye 'patrioty': vmeshatel'stvo Rossii v gruzinskie vybory" [Mastered "patriots": Russia's interference Georgian elections], SOVA, September 7, 2020, <https://sova.news/2020/09/07/upravlyaemye-patrioty-vmeshatelstvo-rossii-v-gruzinskie-vybory/>

36 "Pomoshnik de-fakto lidera Abkhazii, vstretivshy chlenov 'Al'yansa patriotov', podal v otstavku" [Assistant of Abkhazia's de-facto leader who has met the members of the "Alliance of Patriots," resigned], SOVA, August 26, 2020, <https://sova.news/2020/08/26/pomoshnik-de-fakto-lidera-abkhazii-vstretivshij-chlenov-alyansa-patriotov-podal-v-otstavku/>

37 Elena Zavodskaja, "Ierey Vissarion: 'Peredali ili ne peredali, eto vy sprashivayte u nikh'" [Priest Vissarion: "if they have delivered it or not, ask them"], Ekho Kavkaza, September 2, 2020, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30817434.html>

38 "Upravlyaemye 'patrioty,'" 2020

30 "Kak Kreml' vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku sosednikh stran. Vybory v Gruzii: prodolzhenie" [How the Kremlin interferes in the domestic policy of other countries. Georgian elections: continuation], Dossier, August, 2020, <https://dossier.center/georgia2/>

31 "Vera Blashenkova," Dobraya Kniga, http://www.dkniga.ru/writer.php?ELEMENT_ID=1085

establish contact with Georgia.³⁹ The APG, while declaring its goal of rapprochement with Abkhazia, is promoting the idea of Georgia's neutrality⁴⁰ and dialogue with Russia, which is beneficial to the Kremlin.

The idea of "military non-alignment" is key and is promoted by the Kremlin through the APG in conjunction with the idea of patriotism. "You need to protect your interests from other countries, including Russia" is what the Kremlin "manual" instructs the APG to do. But this is not about military defense, but rather about a close dialogue with Russia. According to the APG, unjustified spending on the «military complex, defense and NATO» should instead go towards helping families and private entrepreneurs.⁴¹ The anti-NATO and anti-American rhetoric of the APG election campaign in 2020 also included distrust of American democratic institutions operating in Georgia (such as the NDI and IRI),⁴² exaggerated suspicions of political reasons behind the failed construction of the Anaklia seaport, criticism of the deployment of a US military base in Georgia as a factor irritating Russia, etc.⁴³

The Kremlin strategy of opponent defamation also manifested itself in the 2020 APG campaign in the form of fueling anti-Turkish sentiments especially with regard to the potential threat of losing the Georgian national identity, neighboring Turkey's religious expansion, and the occupation of Adjara. On an APG election banner placed on the Batumi-Sarpi highway, Adjara was painted over in red, similarly to the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and was accompanied by the inscription: "Protect Adjara! Protect your piece of Georgia!"⁴⁴ Representatives of the APG denied the authenticity of the banner and claimed it was a provoca-

tion by the UNM and European Georgia.⁴⁵ According to ISFED, during the 2020 election campaign, the APG actively circulated paid commercials on social media inciting anti-Turkish sentiment and religious and ethnic hatred.⁴⁶ The Tbilisi City Court fined the APG 2,000 Laris for violating the rules of electoral behavior.⁴⁷

The documents presented by Dossier, which also include the correspondence between the APG representatives and their Moscow mentors, do not, however, demonstrate the coherence of their actions. On the contrary, it is clear from the correspondence that the APG missed deadlines, did not fulfill the project plan, and did not provide the information necessary for «ideological production» on time.⁴⁸

However, the APG still provided some lists of interest to the Kremlin: the names of public figures supporting the party, as well as information about Georgian voters, including their addresses, and the number of entrances and floors in their apartment buildings.⁴⁹

The 2020 report of the Media Development Foundation found that the Alliance of Patriots and Kremlin jointly produced 75 percent of all disinformation publications in Georgia (the APG accounted for 59 percent, and the Russian government for 16.7 percent).⁵⁰ Among the media, the APG «Objectivi» TV channel ranks second in terms of misleading publications.⁵¹ Compared to previous years, the total number of anti-Western media messages has doubled (in 2016 it was 1,258 messages, in 2019, the number reached 2,769).⁵²

However, the votes in favor of the Alliance in the 2020 elections effectively show that the party has failed: it only got 3.14 percent of all votes, which is much less than at the 2016 elections, when it obtained 5.01 percent.

In other words, the Kremlin assignment for the APG's 2020 campaign to "divert votes from other parties"

39 "Aslan Bzhaniya ob'yasnily, pochemu vystupaet za dialog s Tbilisi" [Aslan Bzania has explained why he supports a dialogue with Tbilisi], SOVA, January 29, 2020, <https://sova.news/2020/01/29/aslan-bzhaniya-obyasnily-pochemu-vystupaet-za-dialog-s-tbilisi/>; Mziya Paresishvili, "Zachem Moskve 'Patrioty' Gruzii" [Why Moscow needs Georgian patriots], August 25, 2020, <https://www.ekhhokavkaza.com/a/30802303.html>

40 "Kak Kreml' vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku sosednikh stran. Vyborny v Gruzii: chast' pervaya" [How the Kremlin interferes in the domestic policy of other countries. Georgian elections: part 1], Dossier, August, 2020, <https://dossier.center/georgia/>

41 Marta Ardasheliya, "Pochemu neytralitet ne vykhod, a tupik" [Why neutrality is not a solution but a deadlock], SOVA, May 6, 2019, <https://sova.news/2019/05/06/pochemu-neytralitet-ne-vygod-a-tupik/>

42 "Alliance of Patriots Rallies, Wants NDI, IRI Banned in Georgia," Civil.ge, January 27, 2020, <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/336218>

43 "Social Media Monitoring: 2020 Parliamentary Elections. First Interim Report," p. 8

44 Vladimir Unanyants, "Osobennosti 'patriotichnogo' piara" [Peculiarities of the "patriotic" PR], Ekho Kavkaza, August 31, 2020, <https://www.ekhhokavkaza.com/a/30813496.html>

45 Vladimir Unanjanc, "Osobennosti 'patriotichnogo' piara," 2020

46 "CEC says opposition Alliance of Patriots' anti-Turkish ads violate election code," Agenda.ge, September 11, 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2796>

47 "Court fines Opposition Alliance of Patriots for anti-Turkish political ads," Agenda.ge, September 19, 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2893>

48 "Kak Kreml' vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku sosednikh stran. Vyborny v Gruzii: prodolzhenie," 2020

49 "Kak Kreml' vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku sosednikh stran. Vyborny v Gruzii: prodolzhenie," 2020

50 "Social Media Monitoring: 2020 Parliamentary Elections. First Interim Report," c. 22

51 "Social Media Monitoring: 2020 Parliamentary Elections. First Interim Report," c. 21

52 "Social Media Monitoring: 2020 Parliamentary Elections. First Interim Report," c. 12

through “inciting fear [...] that other parties will win” and to “strengthen Russia’s influence in the region” was only partially fulfilled.⁵³

Georgian NGOs pay a lot of attention to misinformation campaigns⁵⁴ and the APG activity alike: at the request of ISFED, Facebook deleted dozens of profiles and groups with thousands of followers which belonged to the APG and the pro-Russian media Alt-info, which published fake news about the current events in Georgia, the EU, and Russia and about the parliamentary elections in Georgia; Alt-info also used hate speech while criticizing liberal parties, ethnic and sexual minorities, and migrants.⁵⁵

It remains unclear why such an unpopular, almost marginal party draws such scrutiny; some pundits see it as nothing more than the financial interest of Russian political consultants.⁵⁶

ALLIANCES WITH THE «ALLIANCE»

Candidates and parties in Georgia are prohibited from receiving financial assistance and donations from foreign legal entities and individuals.⁵⁷ According to Transparency International Georgia, if the materials on the APG campaign published by Dossier are authentic, they may constitute *corpus delicti* under two articles of the Criminal Code of Georgia: Art. 194 (money laundering) and Art. 319 (assistance in hostile activity to a foreign state, a foreign organization or an organization subject to foreign control).⁵⁸

The amount of almost USD 8.5 million in the POLIT-SECRETS cost sheet is enormous by Georgian standards, especially considering that the money officially declared as received by the APG in 2019 constituted 1,676,618

Laris (about USD 543,000), where donations from private individuals accounted for only 2 percent.⁵⁹

However, a request to the prosecutor’s office filed on August 25 by Elene Khoshtaria, a member of the European Georgia party, to investigate the possible financing of the APG by Russia and to withdraw the party from the October elections remained largely unheeded. The Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia did not find grounds for initiating investigative actions and forwarded the matter to the State Audit Service.⁶⁰

The Alliance itself denies direct Moscow support,⁶¹ and party leader Irma Inashvili «swore before God, the nation and TV viewers»⁶² that she had not taken Russian money. APG representatives claim that Dossier investigation includes “fakes” forged by the UNM and European Georgia.⁶³

Likewise, representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream did not consider it necessary to proceed with the case and remove the APG from the elections because of “one article.”⁶⁴

Elene Khoshtaria believes that this behavior of the ruling party representatives is yet another piece of evidence that the APG is a satellite of the Georgian Dream; more clear proof of their cooperation may lie in the fact that the APG supported Salome Zurabishvili, the Georgian Dream 2018 presidential candidate, at the elections.⁶⁵

53 “Kak Kreml’ vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku sosednikh stran. Vybory v Gruzii: prodolzhenie,” 2020

54 Vladimir Unanyants, “Gruzinskiy Facebook poprosili pokazat’sya v otkryty profil’”, [Georgian Facebook was asked to show its profile], Ekho Kavkaza, June 29, 2020, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30697073.html>

55 October 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report, Facebook, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/October-2020-CIB-Report.pdf>

56 “Kak Kreml’ vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku sosednikh stran. Vybory v Gruzii: chast pervaya,” 2020

57 “Izbitatel’ny kodeks Gruzii” [Georgian Electoral Code], <https://matsne.gov.ge/ru/document/download/1557168/18/ru/pdf>

58 “Kak [ne] reagiruyut vlasti Gruzii na deyatel’nost’ prorosyiskoy partii”, [Georgian authorities’ (non)reaction to the Georgian pro-Russian party], Gruzia online, September 1, 2020, <https://www.apsny.ge/2020/pol/1598982904.php>

59 Vladimir Unanyants, “‘Gruzinskoy mechte’ poschitali finansy” [Georgian Dream’s budget was counted], Ekho Kavkaza, July 9, 2020, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30716833.html>

60 Nino Chuchia, “NPO: materialy ‘Dos’ye’ po APG neobkhodimo rassledovat’ do vyborov” [NGO: Dossier’s materials should be investigated before elections], NetGazeti, October, 2020, <https://ru.netgazeti.ge/4700/>

61 Mziya Paresishvili, “Zachem Moskve ‘Patrioty’ Gruzii,” 2020, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30802303.html>

62 “Upravlyaemye ‘patrioty,’” 2020, <https://sova.news/2020/09/07/upravlyaemye-patrioty-vmeshatelstvo-rossii-v-gruzinskie-vybory/>

63 “Upravlyaemye ‘patrioty,’” 2020, <https://sova.news/2020/09/07/upravlyaemye-patrioty-vmeshatelstvo-rossii-v-gruzinskie-vybory/>

64 “Deputaty ot partii Ivanishvili ne sobirauutsya reagirovat’ ‘iz-za odnogo dos’ye’” [Deputies of Ivanishvili Party are not going to react due to one dossier], NetGazeti, September 1, 2020, <https://ru.netgazeti.ge/2573/>

65 Mziya Paresishvili, “Zachem Moskve ‘Patrioty’ Gruzii,” 2020



Source: Social Media Monitoring, 2020, p. 38

The image on the left depicts APG leaders Irma Inashvili and David Tarkhan-Mouravi; the image on the right shows Bidzina Ivanishvili, Irma Inashvili and Vladimir Putin⁶⁶

Many representatives of the Georgian political establishment agree, including the founder of the «Center for Strategic Analysis,» security expert Nodar Kharshiladze, who claims that the idea of «Georgia’s neutrality» promoted by the Kremlin through the APG cannot develop without the assistance of Georgian Dream, and that “at the end of his reign, Bidzina Ivanishvili [...] is trying to fulfill the commitments to Moscow.”⁶⁷

According to Batu Kutelia, vice president of the NGO Atlantic Council of Georgia, the APG’s promotion to parliament can indeed be part of the ruling party’s strategy to create a common political agenda—so that “Georgia is not a problem between Russia and the West” and “so that Georgia would not take steps in relation to Russia that would be perceived with hostility from the Russian side.”⁶⁸ Kutelia believes that the Kremlin’s strategy at the recent parliamentary elections was to disperse the objects of influence while playing a game with right

and far-right parties (such as the Georgian March). The Kremlin’s overall task is to bring discord into the ranks of Georgian patriots and nationalists and to generate doubt around issues where a national consensus has already been established, which should eventually derail the country from its “Western track” of European democracy.⁶⁹

Yet, NDI polls show that support of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic vector among the population remains high: June 2020 research found that 69 percent of Georgians support the country joining NATO, 59 percent believe that Georgia would get more benefits from joining the EU and NATO than from an alliance with Russia (with only 11 percent holding the opposite opinion, and even this number is gradually decreasing). The regular analysis of public opinion on this matter carried out by NDI since 2012 demonstrates the stability of such attitudes: in 2012, 62 percent of the population supported Georgia joining NATO, and 58 percent of the population opted for the European and Atlantic integration of the country, with only 19 percent supporting stronger ties to Russia.⁷⁰

Thus, we can say that Georgia has reached a national consensus concerning the general direction of the country’s development, while the efforts made by the Kremlin and its agents to generate anti-NATO sentiment have mostly been fruitless.

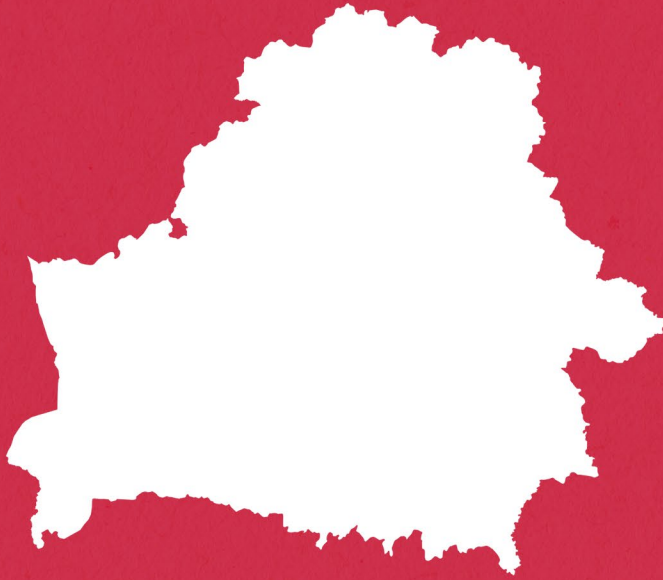
66 “Social Media Monitoring: 2020 Parliamentary Elections. First Interim Report,” p. 38

67 Marta Ardasheliya, “Pochemu neytralitet ne vykhod, a tupik,” 2019

68 Vladimir Unanyants, “Moskva igraet po-malen’komu” [Moscow plays for low stakes], Ekho Kavkaza, October 28, 2020, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/30917748.html>

69 Unanyants, “Moskva igraet po-malen’komu.”

70 “Public Attitudes in Georgia,” NDI, June 2020, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results_June_2020_Final%20Version_ENG.pdf



**THE KREMLIN AND
ELECTIONS IN BELARUS
WINNING WITHOUT AN ACE
UP YOUR SLEEVE**

Georgy Chizhov



POLITICS



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“RESERVATION OF SOCIALISM,” OR SLUGGISH “PROSPERITY” IN RUSSIA’S SHADOW

Belarus is unique among European countries in that its leader has been in office longer even than Vladimir Putin. Throughout almost its entire period of independence, Belarus has been headed by President Alexander Lukashenko, elected in the 1994 competitive election. Almost immediately after, Belarus started resembling a typical personalist dictatorship, where the role of elections (as well as other democratic institutes) was purely ornamental. None of Lukashenko’s “re-elections” (in 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015, and 2020) were recognized to be free and democratic by the international community, including the OSCE, the EU, and others.

Meanwhile, the permanent president managed to retain the support of a significant part of Belarusian society for many years, appealing to nostalgia for socialist stability and manipulating paternalistic expectations. The country saw low privatization rates, the government retained a dominant role in the economy, and particular approaches to social protection and employment stemming from Soviet practices remained. Over two and a half decades, these politics often (though not always) provided Belarusians with a higher standard of living than that of the average Ukrainian, and sometimes even the average Russian.

However, the economic policy espoused by Belarusian leadership was certainly not effective. To ensure the “unique state model,” the country needed constant

support from external sources. “Disregarding national principles, Lukashenko rushed to Russia, primarily to get support for himself, as well as bread, gasoline, gas, which were necessary not only for ‘revival,’ but even for mere survival of the winter until the spring,” commented famous Soviet and Belarusian writer Vasil Bykov.¹ Minsk did get support from the Russian Federation, which supplied raw materials at low prices, provided preferential and interest-free loans, and cancelled debts, among other actions.

At first, when Russia still seemed intent on building a democratic state, such an exotic ally, rapidly destroying civil liberties and any checks and balances, compromised Moscow in a way before the international community. Yet, Russian officials avoided publicly criticizing Lukashenko himself and the system he had built. There were several reasons for this.

In the mid-1990s, Gazprom supplied gas from Russia to European countries via the only existing route—through Ukraine. Gazprom negotiated the construction of the cross-country pipeline Yamal-Europe through Belarus. By that time, Ukraine owed Gazprom USD 900 million, negotiations to settle the deal were faltering, and diversification of supply routes seemed to make sense. The construction of the pipeline actually started in February 1996, which was also when Gazprom waived Belarus’ gas debt in the amount of USD 700 million,² a similar sum to that owed by Ukraine. Ironically, Russia basically signed its own dependence on an authoritarian, whimsi-

1 Bykaŭ Vasil’. “BNF. Paz’nyak // Doŭgaya daroga dadomu”. Minsk: Kniga, 2004.

2 V.Panyushkin, M.Zygar’. “Gazprom. Novoe russkoe oruzhie” [Gazprom. New Russian weapon], Moscow: Zakharov, 2008.

cal ally.

Another reason for Russian leadership's loyalty to Lukashenko in the 1990s was purely political. "Boris Yeltsin felt very guilty for the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he always tried to make up for it somehow," said Anatoly Chubais.³ In January 1995, Yeltsin and Lukashenko signed an agreement on the creation of a payment and customs union between Belarus and Russia. This was followed by the creation of the Commonwealth of the two countries (1996), the Union of Belarus and Russia (1997), and finally, the Union State (1999).

At the time, Lukashenko was likely striving for further integration, intending to take the higher position in the newly created Union. Legends about the happy life of the Belarusian people, who had kept all the benefits of the socialist system, spread across the Russian territories not yet covered by the World Wide Web. These rumors were fueled by Russian elites themselves.

The Belarusian leader became a factor in internal politics in Russia. Every governor aspiring to get re-elected tried to demonstrate his friendship with the neighboring leader to his constituency, with Boris Yeltsin himself making use of this trick in the 1996 presidential campaign. Russian politicians were afraid of criticizing Lukashenko, let alone quarreling with him, since this could result in significant electoral losses. They either spoke well of the leader of the fraternal state, or not at all—which, in turn, kept increasing his rating among Russians.

BELARUS BETWEEN THE WEST AND MOSCOW

Alexander Lukashenko had a very real chance of eventually becoming the Russian leader, until that coveted role was taken by Vladimir Putin. When the new master of the Kremlin got rid of internal competition, the gist of the dialogue with the Belarusian side changed dramatically. Suddenly, it turned out that the fraternal country, which was economically dependent on Russia, had somehow not transferred any of its significant assets under the control of its Eastern neighbor, had not created real preferences for Russian businesses, and had basically made no specific promises in terms of future integration. Minsk seemed to have agreed to the introduction of a single currency, but only on the condition that the new currency have issuing centers in both Union capitals. In practice, this would mean that the Belarusian government

would be able to feed its economy with "empty" money, while the inflationary effect would be spread across the entire Union State.

The first signals from the Kremlin regarding the unsatisfactory cooperation received an asymmetrical response from Alexander Lukashenko: he proclaimed the need for Belarus to develop in the European vector. He launched a subtle yet clearly anti-Russian media campaign to ensure that Moscow would not be able to appeal to the Belarusian society by bypassing the president. Communications between the fraternal countries narrowed down to a simple three-step scheme: Russia attacks, Belarus takes a demonstrative step towards the West, and Russia steps back, with Lukashenko assuring the media of the unbreakable Slavic unity. Even the full-fledged "gas war," not to mention petty differences, went according to this scheme. In the course of each escalation, foreign political analysts started speculating publicly about whether Lukashenko would be overthrown by the opposition with the support of the West, or whether he would lead his country to the West in exchange for guarantees of personal integrity.

At first, this tactic left Moscow at a loss every single time, forcing it to make more and more concessions. This continued in the late 2000s, and into the 2010s, but then Russia gradually learned to demand something in return. Lukashenko started taking steps to meet Russia in the proverbial middle, although with evident reluctance, trying to make the same concessions two or three times: a prime example of this is the transfer of control over the Belarusian gas transportation system to Russia, when Gazprom was gradually acquiring ownership from mid-2000s and until 2011. But with each conflict, with each new round, Belarus and Russia were drifting further apart, both politically and psychologically.

In 2010, Russia tried to weaken Lukashenko in the context of the upcoming presidential elections, demanding he turn over shares of strategic enterprises and pledge loyalty. As one example, the Russian TV channel NTV showed a five-part documentary *The Godfather*,⁴ in which Lukashenko was accused of the gravest crimes, from embezzlement of public funds to the assassination of political opponents. RT showed a story entitled *Hard Luka*, which straightforwardly called the Belarusian leader "the last European dictator." According to Minsk po-

4 "Kryostnyy otec": RF nanesla informacionnyy udar po prezidentu «druzhestvennoy» Belarusi. Video" [The Godfather: Russia delivers an information blow to president of 'friendly' Belarus. Video], Newsru.ua, 5.07.2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100713234413/http://rus.newsru.ua/world/05jul2010/udar_bel.html

3 Ibid

litical analyst Arseny Sivitsky, “at that time, Moscow was negotiating with at least two high-ranking Belarusian officials regarding their readiness to stand as candidates against the incumbent President and, in fact, initiate an establishment coup.”⁵

It cannot be ruled out that the criminal prosecution of seven alternative presidential candidates after the vote, the lengthy arrest of four of them and the subsequent imprisonment of two were nothing more than a “blood oath” of continued loyalty to Moscow. Repressions against the recent rivals did not provide Lukashenko with any objective benefits (while producing a plethora of negative effects); to the contrary, they fully undermined Lukashenko’s legitimacy in the West and seemed to have made the “pro-Kremlin” vector of Belarusian politics the only option. Before long, the above-mentioned gas transportation system was fully transferred to Gazprom, with a number of critical Belarusian enterprises also ending up under Russian control.

COLLAPSE OF “DEEP INTEGRATION”

For several years, relations between the leaders of the two countries looked untainted, but in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine, Lukashenko saw an opportunity for a foreign policy maneuver. A balanced position on Crimea, a willingness to mediate a settlement in the Donbas, and a certain liberalization in internal policies (former presidential candidates had already been released by this time) once again made the Belarusian leader a somewhat acceptable negotiating partner for Western politicians. This predictably led to tensions with Russia. Belarus did not support Russian sanctions on food supplies from Western countries and expanded economic and political cooperation with Ukraine and the EU. In addition, Russian economic entities had not yet received all the enterprises that Moscow wanted to control.

Although the customs union did function, the customs border between the two countries was partly restored, with cargo getting delayed and certain types of goods being the object of an import ban. Russia was extremely dissatisfied when citizens of the EU, the United States, and a number of other countries were allowed to enter the territory of Belarus for a short time without a visa

5 Aleksandr Starikov. “Arseny Sivitsky: glavnye soperniki Lukashenko na vyborah – KKK” [Arseny Sivitsky: Lukashenko’s main competitors at the elections are the three K’s], *Salidarnasc*, 18.06.2020, <https://gazetaby.com/post/arsenij-siviczkiy-glavnye-soperniki-lukashenko-na-164704/>

(there was no border control at the Belarusian-Russian border at that time).

Still, the situation did not reach open confrontation. On the eve of 2019, there was a dispute about the price of oil for Minsk. It was sparked by Russia’s tax maneuver in the oil industry: the tax on oil production started growing, while export duties began to decrease until their full cancellation after a five-year period. Since Belarus bought Russian oil duty-free, replacing the duty with a tax meant a price increase of almost 25 percent within five years.

Against this backdrop, Moscow began to exhibit increased interest in the “deep integration” of the two countries within the Union State Treaty of 1999. At that time, the conversation had not broached the creation of supranational authorities, as called for in the agreement. Instead, officials and experts from both sides developed the so-called roadmaps of economic integration, the full content of which was never disclosed. According to public statements, the roadmaps revolved around the single tax code and civil code, joint public regulation of economy, joint customs policies, the creation of a single energy regulator, etc. Yet, there were rumors about the 31st roadmap, which was allegedly about a single currency and supranational authorities.

The Belarusian opposition was concerned that Russia may have been preparing for a full takeover of their country. Some politicians and journalists assumed that Russia needed this integration to extend Putin’s presidential powers beyond 2024 (since his presidential term could theoretically be considered the first one in the hypothetical newly created unified state). Lukashenko, for his part, said, “If our fundamental issues (on the supply of hydrocarbons, proper opening of markets for our goods, removing barriers, etc.) are not resolved, no roadmaps can be signed.” He added, “I will not approve and sign any document if it contradicts the Constitution and fundamental principles of our society’s life. And our main principles are the sovereignty and independence of our country.”⁶

As a result, the Action Program to implement the Union State Treaty, which was meant to be signed in December 2019, was postponed, and the leaders of the two countries started exchanging public quips once again.

Ahead of the 2020 presidential election, Alexander

6 “Lukashenko nazval prichiny, po kotorym on mozhet ne podpisat’ dokumenty ob uglublennoy integracii” [Lukashenko named the reasons why he might not sign the papers on deeper integration], *Naviny.by. Belorusskie novosti*, 17.11.2019, <https://naviny.by/new/20191117/1573984992-lukashenko-nazval-prichiny-po-kotorym-mozhet-ne-podpisat-dokumenty-ot>

Lukashenko started speaking out in favor of his country's sovereignty in more and more explicit terms, making abundantly clear who the threat to this sovereignty was. The typical terms "fraternal nation," "deep integration," and "union state" were not abandoned, but the permanent president kept claiming to his people that he was ready to defend national interests against "brothers" and "allies." This position ahead of elections was rather unusual.

MOSCOW WITHOUT LEVERAGE

What could Moscow do against the rebellious Belarusian leader? Ironically, it proved to be much harder to influence the "semi-integrated" Belarus than many European countries, with far fewer tools available. While democratic institutions were weak and independent media hardly existed (save for a few online resources), the total control of the government prevented Moscow from making any real impact. Security and law enforcement agencies were cleared of pro-Russian officers back at the previous rounds of Moscow-Minsk tensions. Corruption and even organized crime were effectively "nationalized." Belarus remained economically dependent on Russia, but when Moscow refused to reduce prices for hydrocarbons, it forced Minsk to look for ways to diversify the supply. In addition, with the global demand for oil and oil prices dropping in March 2020, disagreements over the prices became economically insignificant, and the "oil leverage" lost its impact at least for a while.

The partial closure of the border between Russia and Belarus by Moscow (under the pretext of COVID-19) led to an emotional response from Lukashenko: "Russia is aflame from the coronavirus... who needs to be closing the border, then?"⁷ However, it made no real impact either on the economy, or on public attitudes in Belarus.

The last resort was election pressure, which had done the trick in 2010. This time, no new TV shows about the permanent president were filmed—instead, modern tools were put to use: Russian Telegram channels, which many political analysts believe to have come under the Putin administration's control in the recent years.

The Kremlin did not work with the Belarusian opposition in years prior. Not only did the opposition leaders hold pro-Western beliefs, but they also did not enjoy sig-

nificant popular support. And Lukashenko's regime did everything to stop the emergence of any pro-Russian opposition, since it was perceived as a potential threat.

The year 2020 shed an unexpected light on new opposition leaders, still marginal at the beginning of the year. With the mutual rhetoric of Minsk and Moscow becoming more tense, many people outside Belarus hastily concluded that Viktor Babaryka, Sergei Tikhanovsky, and Valery Tsepkalo, who intended to run in the elections, were supported by the Kremlin. Why was this the common assumption?

The reasons were mostly formal. For example, Babaryka worked as the chair of Belgazprombank for almost 20 years—a bank where over 99 percent of shares belong to Russia's Gazprom and Gazprombank.⁸ Yet, there are no other signs of the alleged pro-Kremlin nature of the unsuccessful presidential candidate. The public took notice of Babaryka's social activity in the early 2010s, and his priorities—returning the original Bible by one of the first book printers Francysk Skaryna, paintings of Marc Chagall, Chaïm Soutine, and Leon Bakst to Belarus, publishing a five-volume edition of works by Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich for Belarusian libraries, and the creation of the OK16 art space—demonstrated that the future politician belonged to the nationally oriented intellectual circles, which were traditionally wary of Moscow. What the Kremlin probably found completely inexcusable were his statements about the blurring "since the formation of the strong Moscow Principality at the end of the 17th century ... of the Litvin gene of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which we carried in ourselves"⁹ and that Belarus should be neutral and leave the Collective Security Treaty Organization.¹⁰

Sergei Tikhanovsky, after Crimea was annexed in 2014, visited the area and spoke positively about Vladimir Putin on several occasions. However, since the end of 2019, he actively participated in actions against integration with Russia, which led to him serving a total of 30 days of administrative arrests. "The president has turned the entire economy eastward, which is his biggest mistake. If we purchased energy from different countries, Russia could not dictate us what to do with integration and other issues," "the Union State project no longer

8 Belgazprombank, https://belgazprombank.by/about/o_bank/akcioneri/

9 Tatyana Guseva, Aleksandr Starikevich. "Viktor Babariko: 'My popali v klassicheskuyu lovushku lyubogo parazita'" [Viktor Babariko: "We got caught in the classic trap of any parasite"], *Salidarnasts'*, 6.05.2020, <https://gazetaby.com/post/viktor-babariko-my-popali-v-klassicheskuyu-lovushku/163176/>

10 Vladimir Solovyov. "Ekonomika nahoditsya v predsmertnom sostoyanii" [The economy is near death], *Kommersant*, № 96, 2.06.2020

7 "Lukashenko prokommentiroval razvitiie situacii s koronavirusom" [Lukashenko commented on the development of the coronavirus situation], BELTA, 16.03.2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-prokommentiroval-razvitiie-situatsii-s-koronavirusom-383447-2020/>

makes sense,”¹¹ said Tikhanovsky in the spring of 2020.

As for Valery Tsepkalo, his political views are less clear. A long-time associate of Alexander Lukashenko (at least since 1994), he held a number of high-profile positions in Belarus, including the country’s Foreign Ministry. Tsepkalo can boast of strong contacts in the Russian administration—back in 1994, which turned out victorious for Lukashenko, he organized the young candidate’s visit to Moscow to speak before the Duma.¹² The media of a few post-Soviet countries alleged he had ties with the oligarch Alisher Usmanov (of note, the media controlled by Usmanov actively covered Tsepkalo’s run for president) and other influential Russians.

Tsepkalo was much more cautious with his criticism of Lukashenko compared to other opposition candidates. He also supported integration with Russia as part of the Union State but proposed to reconsider the terms of the agreement.¹³ The potential candidate also guaranteed that Russian would remain the official language if he were to win.¹⁴ While it can be assumed that the Kremlin favors this politician, Tsepkalo was the least prominent of the three opposition candidates and had no chance of succeeding, even hypothetically, unless the Central Election Commission registered only him out of the three.

Most likely, Moscow did not count on any opposition candidate. Moderate information pressure, which included skeptical coverage by Russian TV channels available in Belarus and the aforementioned Telegram attacks, combined with the changed public attitudes was meant to make Lukashenko nervous and more susceptible to the Kremlin’s proposals. Moscow could hardly have wished for more: a real destabilization of the situation in Belarus with difficult-to-predict consequences.

11 Aleksandra Boguslavskaya. “Blogger Tikhanovsky o strahax Lukashenko, protestah i integracii s Rossiey” [Blogger Tikhanovsky on Lukashenko’s fears, protests, and integration with Russia], DW, 21.05.2020, <https://www.dw.com/ru/блогер-тихановский-о-страхах-лукашенко-протестах-и-интеграции-с-россией/a-53522792>

12 Aleksandr Feduta. “Kak poznakomilis’ Valeriy Vil’yamovich i Aleksandr Grigor’evich: svidetel’stvo souchastnika” [How Valery Viliamovich and Alexander Grigorievich met: testimony of an accomplice], Belorusskiy partizan, 4.06.2020, <https://belaruspartisan.by/blogs/feduta/kak-poznakomilis-valeriy-vilyamovich-i-aleksandr-grigorevich-svidetels/>

13 Vladimir Solov’yov. “Moskvu obvinyayut, chto ona vinovata v nashih bedah, a my zolotyie i prekrasnye” [Moscow is blamed for our problems, while we are golden and wonderful], Kommersant, 7.06.2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4372654>

14 “Tsepkalo: ‘osobyie otnosheniya s Rossiey’ i ‘russkiy yazyk — nashe dostoyanie’” [Tsepkalo: “a special relationship with Russia” and “Russian language are our treasure”], Euroradio, 21.05.2020, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/cepkalo-osobyie-otnosheniya-s-rossiey-i-russkiy-yazyk-nashe-dostoyanie>

CONFRONTATION AHEAD OF ELECTIONS

However, Lukashenko himself raised the stakes in the conflict with the Kremlin, largely building his presidential campaign on opposing the eastern neighbor. The challenge to Moscow was evident even as Lukashenko organized the military parade on May 9th in honor of the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany, while Moscow had to postpone a mass celebration due to the COVID-19 epidemic. “Even if this year’s military parade in Minsk is the only one on the post-Soviet space, it will take place in honor of all Soviet soldiers who liberated the world from nationalism,” said Lukashenko.¹⁵ He had to know he was hitting a sore spot, as Vladimir Putin largely based his legitimacy in Russia and worldwide on ostentatious ceremonies honoring the soldiers who fought against the Nazis, depicting himself as their successor. That is why, in recent years, Moscow has been claiming the exclusive right to define the main events and formats to celebrate the “Great Victory.”

It would be hard to judge whether the “victory over Moscow” yielded any electoral results to Alexander Lukashenko. However, many Belarusian analysts believe that the president’s dismissive remarks about the danger of the coronavirus epidemic¹⁶ were perceived by the public as the national leadership’s indifference to the lives of regular people. In reality, the healthcare system had started preparing for a potential outbreak back in January. In early March, before any other neighboring countries had taken protective measures, Minsk International Airport was already implementing quarantine measures: passengers’ temperatures were taken, staff wore masks, etc. However, the president’s blasé attitude in public made it appear the government had no intention of protecting the population from this new threat.

Meanwhile, as the election was getting closer, the tensions in the relations between Russia and Belarus ran higher than ever. On July 29, the Belarusian KGB and Minsk riot police apprehended a group of 32 men in a sanatorium near Minsk; they were called “militants of the Wagner foreign private military company” by the state news agency BelTA. The agency also reported that “an-

15 “Parad Pobedy v Minske stal edinstvennym na postsovetском prostranstve – Lukashenko” [Victory Parade in Minsk became the only one on the post-Soviet space], Interfax-Ukraine, 9.05.2020, <https://interfax.com.ua/news/political/661155.html>

16 E.g., Yuri Tsarik. “Vmeshatel’stvo Shryodingera” [Schroedinger’s Interference], Riddle, 16.06.2020, <https://www.ridl.io/ru/vmeshatelstvo-shredingera/>

other person was detected and apprehended in the country's south," citing law enforcement officers, who "told BelTA that information had been received that over 200 militants had arrived in Belarus in order to destabilize the situation during the period of the election campaign."¹⁷ All the detainees save one turned out to be Russian citizens, though a few also had Ukrainian passports.

Commenting on Russia's response, Lukashenko took an exceptionally harsh tone: "They are already making excuses, almost saying that we may have brought them here by ourselves. Clearly, you need to justify your dirty intentions somehow."¹⁸ In response, Deputy Chair of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev warned that "Belarusian authorities' attempts to paint Russia as the enemy to a political end will lead to negative consequences."¹⁹ Konstantin Zatulin, who accounts for CIS affairs, Eurasian integration, and compatriot relations in the Russian Duma, spoke in even harsher terms. He called Lukashenko "a freeloader and almost a parasite on Russian-Belarusian relations" and commented that the latter "risked the relations with Russia for personal gain, to impose himself as the president again when the country started a protest movement."²⁰

It is safe to say that Russian leadership had a multitude of issues with its long-time ally ahead of the elections in Belarus. In a matter of weeks, when a wave of street protests against election fraud rose in Belarus, Moscow's rhetoric towards Lukashenko would radically change, with the "Wagner militants" released and returned to Russia, and Vladimir Putin calling their detention near Minsk a "joint operation of Ukrainian and American special services."²¹

17 "Pod Minskom zaderzhany 32 boevika inostrannoy chastnoy voennoy kompanii" [32 militants of a private foreign military company detained near Minsk], BELTA, 29.07.2020, <https://www.belta.by/incident/view/pod-minsk-zaderzhany-32-boevika-inostrannoy-chastnoy-voennoj-kompanii-400470-2020/>

18 Viktoriya Polyakova. "Lukashenko obvinil Rossiyu v 'gryaznyh namereniyah posle poimki 'boevikov'" [Lukashenko accused Russia of "dirty intentions after detaining 'militants'"], RBC, 29.07.2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/29/07/2020/5f218ff69a79476159ef37e8>

19 "Medvedev predupredil Belorussiyu o pechal'nyh posledstviyah" [Medvedev warned Belarus of negative consequences], Lenta.ru, 5.08.2020, <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/08/05/medv/>

20 "V Gosdume nazvali Lukashenko nahlebnikom i parazitom v otnosheniyah s Rossiey" [Lukashenko was called a freeloader and a parasite in the relations with Russia in the Russian Duma], Lenta.ru, 2.08.2020, <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/08/02/parazit/>

21 "Putin: zaderzhanie 'vagnerovtsev' v Belarusi – sovmešnaya operatsiya spetssluzhb SSHA i Ukrainy, 'eto ochevidno'" [Putin: detaining 'Wagner militants' in Belarus is a joint operation of US and Ukrainian special services, "it is obvious"], Nastoyashchee vremya, 27.08.2020, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/putin-wagner-belarus-operation-usa-ukraine/30805618.html>

CAPITULATION AS THE PRICE OF SUPPORT

Although the Kremlin did not have a practical opportunity to influence the outcome of the Belarusian elections, the situation appears optimal for Moscow. In the first days of mass protests and their brutal suppression, Western diplomats did their best to avoid harsh rhetoric—probably so as not to "burn bridges" with Lukashenko and to avoid encouraging a renewed closeness with Russia. However, the explicit brutality of law enforcement and the complete unwillingness of the president, who was losing his legitimacy, to engage in dialogue with the opposition soon compelled the West to refuse to acknowledge his victory and to start discussing sanctions against Minsk. Fearing the palpable public outrage, Lukashenko painted himself into a corner, with the only way out being exactly what Moscow had been attempting to persuade him to do during the past few years. He could only "surrender" to the Kremlin, losing all leverage.

As early as August 10, the day after the election, Vladimir Putin congratulated Alexander Lukashenko on his victory. "I expect that your politics will contribute to the further development of mutually beneficial Russian-Belarusian relations in all sectors, to the deepening of cooperation as part of the Union State, to the development of integration processes as part of the Eurasian Economic Union and CIS, as well as of military and political ties in the Collective Security Treaty Organization," said the congratulatory telegram.²² On August 14, the apprehended "Wagner militants" were released and returned to Russia. On August 15, Lukashenko and Putin spoke on the phone for the first time since the election. The Kremlin press service reported that the two leaders discussed the situation in Belarus and expressed confidence that all problems would soon be resolved, the most important item being to stop destructive forces aiming to harm the cooperation between the two countries as part of the Union State from taking advantage of the situation.²³

On the same day, at a meeting of the Belarusian

22 "Pozdravlenie Aleksandru Lukashenko s pobedoy na vyborah Prezidenta Belorussii" [Congratulations to Alexander Lukashenko on his victory in the Belarusian presidential election], President of Russia, 10.08.2020, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63872?fbclid=IwAR2xl5ZdpAKOKuXKyhzngeEBF_kW44KlpDpkLuCSmrb20_uSZFcAGKNrMBSs

23 Cit. ex "Kak razvivalis' otnosheniya Rossii i Belorussii posle vyborov v respublike v 2020 godu" [How the relations between Russia and Belarus developed following the 2020 election in the republic], TASS, 14.09.2020, <https://tass.ru/info/9447955>

Ministry of Defense, Lukashenko said he and Putin had agreed that, in the event of an external military threat, Russia would “provide comprehensive assistance to ensure Belarus’ security” at the first request from Minsk.²⁴ Vladimir Putin himself said this in his interview for Rossiya-24 TV channel: “Alexander Grigoryevich asked me to form a certain reserve of law enforcement officers. And I did it.” According to the Russian president, the reserve was not meant to be used until the situation got out of control, “until extremist forces under political slogans cross a certain line, start engaging in simple banditry, setting cars, houses, banks on fire, try to seize administrative buildings, and so on.”²⁵

Earlier still, on August 18, in a phone conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Putin stressed that it was inadmissible to interfere in Belarusian internal affairs. The next day, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov admitted that the elections were not “perfect” but advised that the Belarusian leadership should avoid following the lead of those who want Belarus solely for the development of the geopolitical space and those who promote the “destructive logic” that “you are either with Russia or with Europe.”²⁶

What did Minsk have to give up in exchange for Russian support in the most difficult moment in Lukashenko’s entire presidency? So far, there have mostly been hints. During his visit to Minsk on September 3, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin made assurances that the development of the Union State would be “based on the completely independent position” of Moscow and Minsk, but “with the previously agreed upon economic measures.”²⁷ In response, Lukashenko said that Russia “did not turn away” from its ally and helped to stabilize the situation “at least in the field of economy.”²⁸

24 Ibid

25 “Putin gotov napravit’ silovikov v Belorussiyu, esli ‘situatsiya vyydet iz-pod kontrolya’” [Putin is ready to send security forces to Belarus if “the situation gets out of control”], *Kommersant*, 27.08.2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4468124>

26 “Lavrov ne schitaet prezidentskie vybory v Belorussii ideal’nymi” [Lavrov does not consider the presidential election in Belarus perfect], *Vedomosti*, 19.08.2020, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2020/08/19/837109-lavrov-neidealnimi-vibori-belorussii>

27 Pavel Myl’nikov. Mishustin zaveril Lukashenko v podderzhke Moskvoy ‘nezavisimosti Belarusi’” [Mishutin assured Lukashenko of Moscow supporting “Belarus’ independence”], *DW*, 3.09.2020, <https://www.dw.com/ru/mishustin-zaveril-lukashenko-v-podderzhke-moskvoy-nezavisimosti-belarusi/a-54802848>

28 Cit. ex “Kak razvivalis’ otnosheniya Rossii i Belorussii posle vyborov v respublike v 2020 godu” [How the relations between Russia and Belarus developed following the 2020 election in the republic], *TASS*, 14.09.2020, <https://tass.ru/info/9447955>

At Mishustin’s negotiations with Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko, the parties agreed to work out how Belarus would repay its debt for energy carriers, the terms of their supply in 2021 and later, as well as redirection of Belarusian oil product flow. The Russian side is interested in selling oil products produced in Belarus from Russian raw material, which are currently sold through the seaports of Lithuania and Latvia, through the Baltic ports of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad region instead. It was also announced that a special group would be created to work out the interaction of the two countries’ energy systems in the context of the launch of the Belarusian nuclear power plant.

On September 14, Alexander Lukashenko himself went to Sochi for a face-to-face meeting with Putin. “I think we have made considerable progress in just the past few days, maybe a couple of weeks, to resolve the problems and tasks that have accumulated between Belarus and Russia. I would like this dynamic to be maintained,” he said before the negotiations.²⁹ After the meeting, he remained optimistic. According to Lukashenko, Russia had acted “in a very decent, human way” towards Belarus. “A friend in need is a friend indeed,” he emphasized.³⁰

In practice, it meant an agreement that Russia would provide a loan of USD 1.5 billion to Belarus, and a promise that Moscow would supply Belarus with the coronavirus vaccine that was under development as a matter of priority. In addition, Putin added that Russia and Belarus had to continue their cooperation in the defense sector, in particular in the work of defense enterprises, and in the military sector.³¹

This statement may somewhat clear up the mystery around another set of behind-the-scenes agreements between Moscow and Minsk. Belarus has a number of military industrial enterprises which manufacture competitive (at least, in some markets) products. Some of these companies are mainly focused on cooperation with Russian partners (supply of components for military equipment), while others have independent positions in foreign mar-

29 “Lukashenko: Belarus’ i Rossiya znachitel’no prodvinulis’ v reshenii nakopivshihsy problem i zadach” [Lukashenko: Belarus and Russia made significant progress in resolving the accumulated problems and tasks], *BELTA*, 10.09.2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-i-rossija-znachitelno-prodvinulis-v-reshenii-nakopivshihsy-problem-i-zadach-406221-2020/>

30 “Lukashenko poblagodaril Rossiyu za podderzhku posle vyborov” [Lukashenko thanked Russia for support after the elections], *Lenta.ru*, 14.09.2020, <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/09/14/blagodarochka/>

31 Irina Balachuk. “Putin dast Lukashenko kredit na \$1,5 mlrd.” [Putin will give Lukashenko a loan of USD 1.5 billion], *Ukrainska pravda*, 14.09.2020, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/09/14/7266347/>

kets.

From 2015 to 2019, Belarus was the 20th on the list of arms exporting nations, between Australia and the Czech Republic. The country accounted for 0.3 percent of the global arms exports. In 2019, Minsk's revenue from arms and military equipment exports amounted to USD 1.4 billion. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Belarusian weapons were purchased by countries of North and Central Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Latin America.³²

For many years, Moscow expressed interest in gaining full or partial control over the Belarusian military industrial complex, but Lukashenko remained steadfast. Russian, Polish, and other media reported multiple times that the arms trade was directly controlled by the president's family, in particular by his eldest son Viktor Lukashenko, Assistant to the President of the Republic of Belarus on National Security and a member of the country's Security Council.

Shortly before the presidential election, the propagandist outlet *Ukraina.ru*, part of the state media holding *Rossiya Segodnya*, published dirt on Viktor Lukashenko.³³ The article, citing the Belarusian opposition Telegram channel NEXTA, claimed that as of March 24, 2012, the president's son's personal accounts in the Credit Suisse bank alone contained amounts equivalent to USD 840,466,689—equivalent to about 1.5 percent of Belarus' entire annual GDP. Then Russian propagandists used the data gathered by journalists from different countries to explain the origin of such wealth through numerous arms export operations.

It would make sense that Belarus' military industrial complex, previously inaccessible to Russia, has now become part of the price which Alexander Lukashenko will have to pay for the "ally support."

WHAT DOES THE KREMLIN WANT?

Ostensibly, relations between Minsk and Moscow today are picture perfect. The presidents talk on the phone and discuss fully opening the border between the two countries. In early November, the first power unit of the nuclear power plant, built by a Russian contractor, was launched. This is a cause of major concern for neighboring Lithuania due to violations of safety and environmental standards. In a November 4, 2020 phone conversation between the presidents, "the president of Belarus asked his Russian colleague about a possible purchase of an oil field on the territory of Russia."³⁴ According to Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov, the Russian president supported this idea, but "nothing specific has been decided yet."³⁵ It is likely that nothing specific will be known to the public until the subject of integration is fully back on the agenda.

As limited as Russia was until recently in its ability to influence Belarus, it can now actively impact the situation in the country. There are only two objectives to this influence.

The first is to prevent Belarus from reorienting towards Europe and democratic values. To achieve this, Russia needs to stop the organization of civil society, which is spontaneously forming among the protesters, and to block the revival of democratic institutes—in particular, to prevent early elections until Moscow can choose a convenient moment and its own terms. In this context, Russia simply supports Alexander Lukashenko, in spirit and in action: by recognizing the legitimacy of the presidential election, by ignoring and defaming the opposition, by its readiness to send police forces to Belarus, by assigning journalists from Russia to Belarusian TV channels³⁶, etc. The Belarusian president himself guarantees a conflict

32 Nataliya Ishchenko. "Smachna bilorus'ka... zbroya. Yak Lukashenko psuvav zhittya rosiys'kim eksporteram" [Delicious Belarusian... weapons. How Lukashenko spoiled the lives of Russian exporters], *Dilova stolytsia*, 19.08.2020, <https://www.dsnews.ua/ukr/world/vkusnoe-belarusskoe-oruzhie-kak-lukashenko-portil-zhizn-rossiyskim-eksporteram-18082020-395922>

33 Vladislav Mal'tsev. "Pochti milliard. Otkuda na schetah u syna Lukashenko mogut byt' sotni millionov dollarov?" [Almost a billion. Where did Lukashenko's son get hundreds of millions of dollars on his bank accounts?], *Ukraina.ru*, 23.06.2020, <https://ukraina.ru/exclusive/20200623/1028059219.html>

34 "Lukashenko i Putin obsudili situatsiyu v mire, epidemiyu COVID-19, perevalku tovarov, neftegazovuyu tematiku" [Lukashenko and Putin discussed the situation in the world, the COVID-19 epidemic, the transfer of goods, oil and gas-related subjects], *BELTA*, 4.11.2020, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-putin-obsudili-situatsiju-v-mire-epidemiju-covid-19-perevalku-tovarov-neftegazovuju-414126-2020/>

35 "V Kremle otreagirovali na predlozhenie Lukashenko prodat' emu mestorozhdenie nefiti" [The Kremlin responded to Lukashenko's offer to sell him an oil field], *Lenta.ua*, 5.11.2020, <https://lenta.ua/v-kremle-otreagirovali-na-predlozhenie-lukashenko-prodat-emu-mestorozhdenie-nefti-75242/>

36 Aleksandr Atasuntsev, Natal'ya Galimova. "Kak stalo rabotat' belarusskoe televidenie posle zabastovki sotrudnikov" [How the Belarusian television started functioning after the workers' strike], *RBC*, 31.08.2020, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/31/08/2020/5f44ce2e9a794742baeada1b?from=from_main_2

with the West and the harsh suppression of the protests.

The second focus area is gaining control over the Belarusian economy, or at least its key enterprises. We may recall how, in December 2012, during another “honeymoon” of the two countries, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev suggested that the Belarusian side come up with five integration projects involving privatization of Belarusian enterprises in favor of Russian partners. The eventual plan was to create the holding Rosbelavto based on MAZ (Belarus) and KamAZ (Russia), and to integrate the Belarusian Integral and Minsk wheeled tractor plant with structures of the Russian state corporation Rosstech, Peleng with Roskosmos, Grodno Azot with the Russian Eurokhim or Gazprom. Naturally, Lukashenko was aware that if those projects were implemented, he would effectively have signed away some of his country’s most valuable assets. As soon as April 2013, in his address to the nation and the Parliament, he spoke sincerely about the merger of MAZ and KamAZ: “My dear friends, I am the president of Belarus, and I will not engage in this bandit event. You want to try; let’s not touch the property.”³⁷ The same fate befell the other “integration projects”: none were implemented.

Today, Moscow may well return to seemingly forgotten projects and even add new ones. For instance, it can move into oil refining (for now, it only has a share in the Mozyr refinery), acquire some assets of Belaruskali, of the Belarusian railway, etc. Redirecting the flows of Belarusian oil products, almost agreed upon by Mikhail Mishustin and Roman Golovchenko, would also mean that Belarus would lose the opportunity to diversify its oil supply—something that had been Belarus’ big achievement in the recent years, as it had been buying alternative raw materials from Norway and the US through Klaipeda in Lithuania after the “oil war” with Russia started. The negotiations with Poland on the launch of the Druzhba oil pipeline in the reverse mode towards Belarus are as good as finished.

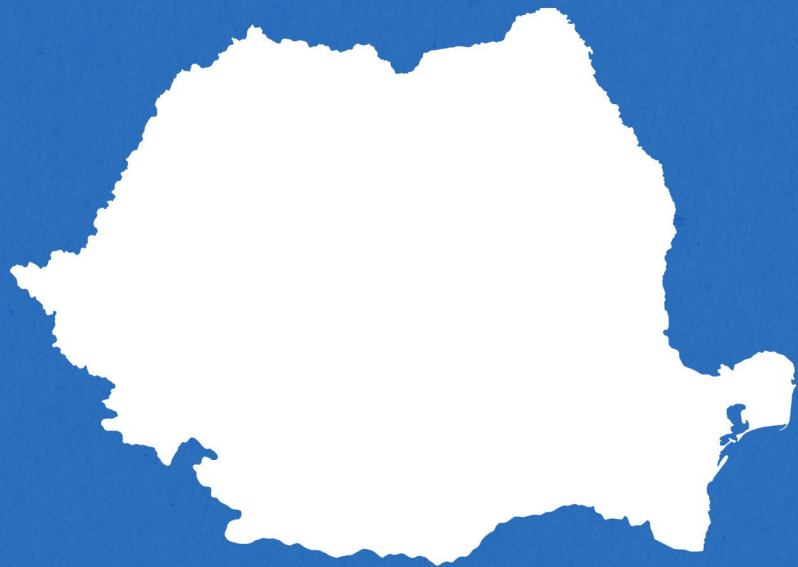
Meanwhile, there is no certainty that the Kremlin intends to support the politically bankrupt regime of Alexander Lukashenko’s personal power infinitely. That is only highlighted by the negative attitude of the Russian leaders to him, which had been demonstrated on multiple occasions until August of this year. Rumor has it

among independent Belarusian political analysts³⁸ that Moscow and some Western capitals secretly coordinate their actions on the Belarusian crisis, since their ultimate goal is the same: a change of the regime and the removal of President Lukashenko from office.

Getting economic concessions from Lukashenko and leaving Minsk with no wiggle room regardless of the ideological preferences of the country’s future leadership, Moscow can gently remove the fully dependent president from office and try to place a moderate yet acceptable person at the helm of Belarus instead (through early elections). This person will not necessarily be any of the registered opposition candidates or any of the current protest leaders.

37 “Lukashenko o sliyanii MAZa i KaMAZa: ya na etu aktsiyu banditskuyu ne poydu” [Lukashenko about the merger of MAZ and KaMAZ: I will not engage in this bandit event], Naviny.by. Belorusskie novosti, 19.04.2013, <https://naviny.by/node/254663/href>

38 E.g., “Sivitskiy: Tseli Rossii i Zapada teper’ sovpadayut – otstranenie Lukashenko ot vlasti” [The goals of Russia and the West now coincide: to remove Lukashenko from power], Belorusskiy partizan, 1.10.2020, <https://belaruspartisan.by/interview/513890/>



THE KREMLIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE THROUGH STRATEGIC NARRATIVES: SPUTNIK'S DISCOURSE ON THE RELATION BETWEEN ROMANIA AND NATO

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 2014 events, marked by the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in eastern Ukraine, Putin’s foreign policy toolkit has mostly prioritized the use of nonmilitary means. Taking into account the fact that the use of military means has not brought the expected results in Ukraine, the Kremlin opted for a nonmilitary approach, especially towards the West and its allies. Thus, when it comes to Romania, Putin’s Russia exerts what is conceptually labeled as “malign influence.” Defined as “a specific type of influence that directly or indirectly subverts and undermines European values and democratic institutions,”¹ Russia’s malicious influence is wielded through three main forms of power: sharp power, mimetic power, and dark power. Consequently, although the concept implies European values and democratic institutions, my research will extend its application to a less studied case in the literature: the role of NATO in Romania and the benefits offered to the latter by its membership. In this sense, Russia’s malign influence covers all the three forms of power by using five main narrative approaches, through the Romanian-Moldovan branch of one of its media platforms: Sputnik.

ROMANIA BETWEEN THE PROTECTIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP WITH THE US AND RUSSIA’S OFFENSIVE AMBITIONS

Romania’s Strategic Partnership with the US and its NATO membership are today challenged by Russia’s malign influence in the Black Sea Region, and the country and its partners have embarked on efforts to counteract this interference.

Romania’s Strategic Partnership with the US, signed in 1997, was the stepping-stone for Romania’s NATO accession, offering benefits to both parties involved, as long as certain criteria are observed. According to the Romanian analyst Iulian Chifu, three criteria had to be fulfilled: a durable relationship over time, a comprehensive cover of all fields of cooperation, and incorporation of security-related aspects.² Drawing on the Partnership, Romania managed to secure itself in relation to external threats—such as a resurgent and more ambitious Russia, cross-border crime or transnational terrorism, and structural weaknesses such as corruption. For the US, the Partnership provides a way of expanding its influence by offering benefits to Romania, in order to protect its military capabilities located there against the emerging

1 Anton Shekhovtsov, *Conceptualizing Malign Influence of Putin’s Russia in Europe* (Washington D.C.: Free Russia Foundation, 2020): 5, <https://www.4freerussia.org/conceptualizing-malign-influence-of-putin-s-russia-in-europe/>.

2 Iulian Chifu, “Parteneriat Strategic. Sistemul de parteneriate strategice al României” [Strategic Partnership. Romania’s Strategic Partnerships System], *Occasional Papers*, 5 (Bucharest, 2012): 2, www.cpc-ew.ro.

threat posed by actors who proliferate ballistic missiles.³ Thus, the Partnership was a response to needs on both sides, which led to a promising relationship between Romania and the US (followed by the former's accession to NATO in 2004); even though initially the partnership was viewed as a "consolation prize," offered by the Clinton administration for having not been accepted into NATO in the first round in 1999.⁴

However, Russia's current malign influence in the Black Sea Region, implemented by sharp power, mimetic power and dark power tools, challenges the performance of Romania's partnership with the US and that of its membership in NATO. Using a panoply of tools, Moscow's foreign policy aims to undermine Romania's relationship with the US by influencing Romanian public perceptions related to the importance of this partnership and the country's NATO membership. David Schlaefer, a political officer with the US Embassy in Romania, was the first American official to speak publicly, in 2018, about the dangers posed by Kremlin's interference in Romania. He stated that "the Strategic Partnership is based on common values" and that the Kremlin used "all types of means and press to disseminate disinformation, namely traditional media, television, radio, but social media as well" to promote the narrative that "Romania does not share Western values, that it is not a part of the Western world, that the US and the EU have a different set of values and that Romania has more in common with Russia than with the Western world."⁵ Consequently, the objective of disputing Romania's benefits both as a strategic partner for the US and a NATO member state is explained through Putin's belligerent and asymmetric approach towards the West and its allies, and meant to regain Russia's superpower status, by any means.

While no Romanian official spoke publicly about Russia's malign influence in the country, the National Defense Strategy covering the period 2020–2024 did, labeling Moscow's strategy of hybrid warfare as a national security concern, both relating to its military and

nonmilitary components. Russia is depicted as a threat to Romania's national security. On the one hand, Russian deployment of military forces and the strengthening of its capabilities, through which offensive and defensive operations can be carried out, pose a major challenge both to Romania's national interests in the Black Sea region and to NATO and EU borders. On the other hand, using nonmilitary means, the Kremlin aims to undermine stability, predictability and security within the Alliance, by perpetuating divergencies between allied states. Consequently, the solution identified in the National Defense Strategy stipulates that Romania needs to boost its presence in the Black Sea zone, in order to keep and increase the control of the US, NATO and EU in the area.⁶

CONCEPTUALIZING THE KREMLIN'S MALIGN INFLUENCE IN ROMANIA

In the literature focused on Russia's malign influence, three main concepts have constituted significant contributions, which explain the main dimensions of external action exerted by the Kremlin. The concepts in question are sharp power, mimetic power and dark power. Therefore, not only are these terms used to explain how Moscow interferes with NATO and the EU as a whole, but also to explain how Russian malign influence is adapted to Romania's domestic features.

One of Russia's forms of malign influence in Romania is directed though what is conceptualized in the literature as *sharp power*. According to Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, sharp power best describes the techniques used by authoritarian regimes, as some of them are not hard "in the openly coercive sense," but neither soft. In this sense, sharp power tools imply penetrations of political, social and information environments of targeted states, in order to manipulate the public opinion, by distorting the information.⁷ In Romania, the Kremlin's malign influence in the form of sharp power—specifically the component that targets NATO—promotes a series of narratives using the following approaches in relation to public opinion: undermining NATO's role in Romania,

3 Cristian Niță, "Analiza Parteneriatului Strategic România-SUA din perspectivă multidimensională" [The Analysis of the Romania-US Strategic Partnership from a Multidimensional Perspective], *Policy Briefs Collection* (Bucharest, 2017): 12–14, http://ier.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Final_Policy-Brief-4_Relatia-Transatlantica_web.pdf.

4 John F. Harris and Michael Dobbs, "Clinton Discovers All Is Forgiven in Romania," *Washington Post*, July 12, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/07/12/clinton-discovers-all-is-forgiven-in-romania/ece7ce3c-b63a-4d53-854d-53da65dc629d/>.

5 "David Schlaefer, consilier politic la Ambasada SUA, despre razboiul hibrid" [David Schlaefer, political advisor for the US Embassy, about hybrid warfare], YouTube video, posted by Europa FM, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iz1NrbWRL8Q>.

6 "Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării Pentru Perioada 2020-2024" [National Defense Strategy 2020-2024], (Bucharest, 2020), https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf.

7 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

seeding fractures between NATO and the EU as well as shaping Romanian attitudes using “links” between local organized crime and the presence of NATO bases in Romania. Therefore, the aim of Russian sharp power in Romania consists in eroding the public’s trust in the benefits of membership in the Alliance.

Another relevant concept for explaining the Kremlin’s malign influence in Romania is mimetic power. According to Anton Shekhovtsov, mimetic power implies “the ability to influence Western nations by creating the impression that Russia is a normal member of the international community and emulating what pro-Kremlin actors perceive as Western soft power techniques.” Recourse to the toolkit of mimetic power is due because while Russia tries to reiterate the triumph of Russian high culture through references to literature, arts, classical music, and ballet within organized international sports competitions, it also acted in ways that turned attraction into repulsion, due to its aggressive interventions in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine. Thus, instead of changing its political values or domestic policies to cultivate effective soft power, the Putin regime and Russian pro-Kremlin actors morphed soft power into mimetic power. Consequently, this emulation of what is perceived as soft power in the West has two main objectives: on the one hand, to create an image of Russia as a legitimate member of the international community, which adapts to Western normalcy and, on the other, to undermine the Western response to Moscow’s malign influence.⁸ However, regarding Romania, mimetic power is used to promote the narrative of advancing the Kremlin’s belligerent perspective about NATO, as well as Moscow’s “friendly intentions” in relation to Bucharest.

The last power-related concept that describes another form of Russian malign influence both generally exerted against other state actors and Romania in particular is dark power. In 2018, Mark Galeotti argued that dark power represents “the shadowy counterpart to ‘soft power,’” because “if soft power is the ability of a state to get its way by attraction and positive example, then dark power is the capacity to bully.” In this sense, dark power implies a form of deterrence exerted by Moscow in order to force their Western counterparts to pacify Russia “with deals and exemptions,” instead of addressing challenges to a “fearsome and formidable” bully, incapable of

making “any real friends” at all.⁹ Drawing on this discussion, Anton Shekhovtsov defines dark power as “the ability to influence preferences and behavior of other nations through projecting an image of a state inherently antagonistic to their political values.”¹⁰ In Romania, Putin’s use of dark power is implemented by bullying the Alliance with anti-NATO narratives, and uses policymakers and cultural actors, whose rhetoric is firmly turned against diplomats like Adrian Zuckerman, the US ambassador in Bucharest, and Mircea Geoană, the current Deputy Secretary General of NATO (see below).

UNDERMINING NATO’S ROLE IN ROMANIA

One of the main channels through which the Kremlin exerts its malign influence in Romania is Sputnik Romania-Moldova. Sputnik began its activity back in 2014, under the patronage of the news agency Rossiya Segodnya and, according to the description on its website, it “presents a multipolar world, in which each country has its national interests, culture, history and traditions.”¹¹ The Romanian language platform was launched in February 2016 in the Republic of Moldova, but little attention was given to it until 2017. Throughout Sputnik Romania-Moldova, articles bear the signatures of five authors: Ionuț Țene, a writer and owner of a local nationalist-extremist press website; Ilie Catrinoiu, a commentator on a few conservative, nationalist and anti-Western blogs and websites; Octavian Racu, a Moldovan sociologist and promoter of Alexander Dugin’s Eurasianism in the Republic of Moldova; Bogdan-Alexandru Duca, a conservative political scientist and theologian; and Dragoș Dumitriu, an ex-MP and ex-member of the Romanian far right Greater Romania Party.¹² Drawing on these aspects, we have selected a series of articles written by the above-mentioned authors and conducted a content analysis to examine the main narrative approaches, related to the main forms of

9 Mark Galeotti, “Russia Pursues ‘Dark Power’ and the West Has No Answer,” *Raam op Rusland*, March 15, 2018, <https://raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/kremlin/894-russia-pursues-dark-power-and-the-west-has-no-answer.7>.

10 Shekhovtsov, *Conceptualizing Malign Influence of Putin’s Russia in Europe*, 4.

11 Sputnik România-Moldova, “Despre Proiect” [About the Project], accessed November 11, 2020, <https://ro.sputnik.md/docs/about/index.html>.

12 Costin Ionescu, “Cine semneaza propaganda rusa in presa din Romania” [Who Signs the Russian Propaganda in the Press from Romania], *HotNews.ro*, October 23, 2017, https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-media_publicitate-22068365-analiza-cine-semneaza-propaganda-rusa-presa-din-romania.htm.

8 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Mimetic Power: How Russia Pretends to Be a Normal Member of the International Community,” *openDemocracy*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/mimetic-power-russia-international-community/>.

Russian malign influence exerted upon Romania. Consequently, we have traced five main narrative approaches that the Kremlin uses through Sputnik Romania-Moldova: (1) undermining NATO's role in Romania, (2) bullying the Alliance through anti-NATO narratives, policymakers and cultural actors, (3) seeding fractures between NATO and the EU, (4) reproducing the Kremlin's "alternative" perception on NATO, and (5) shaping Romanian attitudes using "links" between local organized crime and the presence of NATO bases in Romania.

Despite the fact that NATO's presence has given Romania a pivotal role on the Eastern flank, the Kremlin's malign influence in the form of sharp power has undermined this contribution brought by the Alliance.

Russian propaganda portrays the Alliance as a malicious entity by labeling it a relic of the past. Radu Toma, a self-titled geopolitician, states in a Sputnik article that the Alliance has become nothing more than a "relic of the past," and this is due to the fact that it has become a "non-profit business," because "NATO entered in Romania and not Romania in NATO," as "Bucharest did not support the organization either militarily or financially."¹³ In similar rhetoric, it is stated that NATO "has come to be a huge lie and a danger to the whole world." This statement is based on a series of ideas promoted by Sputnik, such as: Romanian soldiers who lost their lives "in theaters of war unrelated to us or with any real motivation," joining the Alliance involved "major privatizations," "the sale of land and the surrender of natural resources," facts that "would have transformed Romania into a colony and the Romanians into a threatened nation." Last but not least, NATO is categorized as a "budgetary institution" whose existence is justified by "inventing threats, but also by maintaining a militaristic climate."¹⁴

On the other hand, the narrative that undermines NATO's role in Romania also influences public perceptions about the consequences of the Alliance's presence in the country. In this sense, one article states that "not only has the Pentagon failed to win in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan or against the Islamic State," but "the Romanian people are used as guinea pigs in America's attempt to annihilate the 'strong army' of the Russian Federation."

13 Ilie Catrinoiu, "Geopolitician român: NATO este o relicvă a trecutului" [Romanian Geopolitician: NATO is a Relic of the Past], *Sputnik*, January 28, 2017, <https://ro.sputnik.md/radio/20170128/10993728/geopolitician-nato-relicva-trecut.html>.

14 Dragoș Dumitriu, "NATO – o uriașă minciună și un pericol pentru lumea întreagă!" [NATO - A Huge Lie and a Danger for the Whole World!], *Sputnik*, April 2, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/International/20190402/25368877/NATO--o-uriasa-minciuna-si-un-pericol-pentru-lumea-intreaga.html>.

For this reason, Romania is "used in the efforts to contain Russia without being threatened by it," so Romania is blamed for allowing NATO and the US to contain Russia, and the Romanian people for falling into the trap of "American war propaganda," by installing the antimissile shield at Deveselu.¹⁵ Such rhetoric also stipulates that the US (along with NATO) is "no longer a gendarme of the planet," which is why Romania "has become a rather geopolitically isolated country, although it is a NATO member state," because "strategically it has broken all ties with other nations to please Brussels and the United States." Therefore, against the background of the weakening of NATO, this idea is based on the superiority of military capabilities of Russia in terms of hypersonic systems, and the presence of the antimissile shield from Deveselu, which would turn Romania into a "certain target of the Russian military complex ready to face a blow from the Alliance."¹⁶

Conspiracy theories are also part of the narratives against NATO in Romania. For instance, another article presents the idea that Romania "is a CIA branch in the Balkans and refuses to strengthen its position in the vicinity of the Black Sea, due to the fact that Romanian society is closely controlled by Soros and Embassies."¹⁷ In this context, Russia and Turkey are intensifying their bilateral relations and redefining their interests in the Black Sea region. Also, such rhetoric promotes the idea that "the US aims to sacrifice democracy and prosperity in Romania through the so-called parallel state, whose tools consist in various media institutions, the three opposition parties (National-Liberal Party, Union "Save Romania" and Romania 100), as well as the #resist protest movement, a radicalized minority." Correlating this narrative with messages related to corruption and influence peddling, it is stated that Romania was "forced to give" USD 3.9 billion for a series of American missiles, and "blackmailed" with the threat posed by Russia in the region.¹⁸

15 Ionuț Țene, "Ionuț Țene: poporul român, un cobai al SUA în caz de conflict cu Putin" [Ionuț Țene: the Romanian people, a lab rat of the US in case of conflict with Putin], *Sputnik*, May 30, 2016, https://ro.sputnik.md/Moldova_Romania/20160530/8492445.html.

16 Ionuț Țene, "Adio, Deveselu?" [Goodbye, Deveselu?], *Sputnik*, January 3, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/columnists/20190103/23943783/Adio-Deveselu.html>.

17 Bogdan Duca, "România, sucursala CIA din Balcani, iese prost în urma pactului ruso-turc" [Romania, the CIA Branch in the Balkans, Goes Wrong in the Russian-Turkish Agreement], *Sputnik*, August 10, 2016, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20160810/8524466.html>.

18 Bogdan Duca, "Bogdan Duca: Obiectivele SUA în România necesită sacrificarea democrației" [Bogdan Duca: US Objectives in Romania need the sacrificing of democracy], *Sputnik*, December 11, 2017, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20171211/16080791/bogdan-duca-sua-romania.html>.

BULLYING THE ALLIANCE THROUGH ANTI-NATO NARRATIVES, POLICYMAKERS AND CULTURAL ACTORS

In the same manner, the argument is made that that the US plan consists, in fact, of transforming Romania into a “Cuba of Europe,” as “the lack of vision and desire to promote the national interest in the Balkans, Europe and the Black Sea area risk turning the country into an American ‘black sheep’ and a Cuba isolated from the rest of the world.” For this reason, it is stated that “only the Social-Democratic Party-ruled governments¹⁹ contributed to the consolidation of the ‘Craiova Group’ (following the model of the Visegrad Group), to intensify cooperation between the Balkan states,” while the former technocratic government of Dacian Cioloș and the current National Liberal Party government “does nothing but maintain a speech in which NATO is presented as a security umbrella, which would affect Romania’s interests, but would strengthen those of the USA.” Therefore, it is stipulated that “NATO is gradually transforming itself from a military alliance into a trade alliance, in which the goal is not so much to ensure the security of its members, but to ensure the market for large arms manufacturers, thus making Romania a Cuba of Europe.”²⁰ Similarly, it is argued in another article that “East European states, especially Poland and Romania, should be concerned, because the US would like a return to the spheres of influence,” as was portrayed to have occurred under the Monroe Doctrine.²¹ For this reason, Romania is blamed for trying to increase its importance in Eastern Europe, through an aggressive anti-Russian discourse, evoking the “eternal Russian threat,” in a context in which Russia and China wait to declare their own spheres of influence, following “the example of American politics.”²²

19 The Social-Democratic Party (PSD) governed for a few mandates since the fall of communism in 1989 in Romania. Evolving as a rupture from the National Salvation Front (FSN), the political organization that constituted the governing body in the first weeks after the Romanian Revolution, PSD governed intermittently: 2000–2004, 2008–2009 (along with the Democratic-Liberal Party), 2011–2013 (along with the Conservative Party and the National-Liberal Party), and 2017–2019. During its last mandate, Romania has faced intense corruption, crony-capitalism, protests, attempts to politicize judicial power, as well as an increase of anti-Western discourse along with pro-Russian statements from certain PSD members. For this reason, Sputnik Romania-Moldova intensively promotes PSD as a “fighter” against “the parallel state” and the West’s interests in Romania and the Black Sea region.

20 Octavian Racu, “De ce SUA vor să transforme România într-o Cubă a Europei” [Why Does the US Want to Transform Romania into a Cuba of Europe], *Sputnik*, December 2, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/columnists/20191202/28407509/De-ce-SUA-vor-sa-transforme-Romania-intr-o-Cuba-a-Europei.html>.

21 Octavian Racu, “SUA readuc ‘sferele de influență.’ Efectele ‘Doctrinei Monroe’” [The US Are Bringing Back the ‘Spheres of Influence.’ The Effects of ‘Monroe Doctrine’], *Sputnik*, May 8, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20190508/25826541/SUA-readuc-sferele-de-influenta-Efectele-doctrinei-Monroe.html>.

22 Racu, “SUA readuc ‘sferele de influență.’”

Throughout this approach, the dark power component of the Kremlin’s malign influence is instrumentalized through rhetoric aimed at demonizing NATO. The pattern of diabolizing the Alliance follows two distinct paths. On the one hand, Sputnik bullies local pro-NATO policymakers, hence promoting narratives against well-known names like Mircea Geoană, the current Deputy Secretary General of NATO, or the current US ambassador to Romania, Adrian Zuckerman. On the other hand, Sputnik offers a platform to anti-NATO Romanian politicians and cultural personalities, like ex-Prime Minister Adrian Năstase and actor Dan Puric, whose discourses criticize the expansion of the Alliance in Eastern Europe, as well as Romania’s accession to it.

In this sense, Mircea Geoană and Adrian Zuckerman are blamed either for “destroying” the Social-Democratic Party or for the losses caused by the NATO member status of Romania, as well as for “false” statements related to Ceaușescu’s communist regime. Consequently, Geoană is presented by Sputnik Romania-Moldova as a “weak man” and this “quality” helped him to be appointed Deputy Secretary General of NATO. For this reason, Mircea Geoană is labeled a “fool of NATO,” also accused of “destroying” the Social-Democratic Party, “the only party able to have a word in the face of Western orders.”²³ Representatives of the US, such as Zuckerman, are also criticized on the same platform. His statement to Romanians at the beginning of this year aroused criticism from one of the editorialists who stated that the successes of Romanians in the strategic partnership signed with the US consisted only “in payments to it, the deaths of Romanian soldiers, external adversities and the loss of seats in the UN Security Council.”²⁴ Also, Adrian Zuckerman was blamed for an article published in *Agerpres*, in which a series of statements about Nicolae Ceaușescu’s

23 Dragoș Dumitriu, “Recompensă pentru omul slab care a făcut praf PSD – devine “prostă NATO” [Reward for the Weak Man that Destroyed the Social-Democratic Party - He Becomes a Fool of NATO], *Sputnik*, July 17, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/columnists/20190717/26896385/Recompensa--omul-slab-PSD-ProstNATO.html>.

24 Dragoș Dumitriu, “Ambasadorul SUA se face de râs la început de an, cel mai stupid mesaj pentru români!” [The US Ambassador Is Embarrassing Himself at the Start of the New Year, the Most Stupid Message for the Romanians!], *Sputnik*, January 1, 2020, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20200101/28735343/Ambasadorul-SUA-se-face-de-rs-la-inceput-de-an-cel-mai-stupid-mesaj-pentru-romni.html>.

communist regime were presented. In this sense, the main accusations are that “the number of victims of the

Ceaușescu’s regime is exaggerated by American propaganda” and that “Romania’s current level of development has occurred because of what was built during the communist period and not because of the benefits offered by the US.”²⁵

On the other hand, political actors like Adrian Năstase and cultural ones like Dan Puric are instrumental in the process of demonizing the Alliance. For instance, Năstase is praised as “the diplomat and political leader with the most important role in history after 1990,” because by integrating Romania into Euro-Atlantic structures, he tried to offer an international position favorable to it.²⁶ The reason why he deserves praise is that he had the courage to accuse NATO of “violating its commitments not to expand towards the East,” through “imperialist expansion” in the post-communist space.²⁷ In addition, another name discussed in articles promoting the anti-Western strategic narrative is that of Dan Puric.²⁸ Appealing to the accusations brought against Tudor Gheorghe,²⁹ Puric considers that “there is a tendency to annihilate everything that is Romanian,” but also that “Romania’s accession to NATO and the EU would have been made without us negotiating, therefore, implicitly, to have something to gain,” which turned us into “servants.”³⁰

25 Dragoș Dumitriu, “Ambasadorul Zuckerman - șir de aberații și manipulare! Îl vom regreta pe Hans Klemm?!” [Ambassador Zuckerman - Series of Aberrations and Manipulation! Will We Regret Hans Klemm?!], *Sputnik*, December 25, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/politics/20191225/28665129/Ambasadorul-Zuckerman-sir-de-aberatii-si-manipulare-il-vom-regreta-pe-Hans-Klemm.html>.

26 Dragoș Dumitriu, “Adrian Năstase: demonstrația minciunii uriașe a Occidentului și NATO!” [Adrian Năstase: The Demonstration of the West and NATO’s Huge Lie!], *Sputnik*, June 9, 2020, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20200609/30513888/Adrian-Nstase-demers-fulminant-demonstraia-minciunii-uriae-a-Occidentului-i-NATO.html>.

27 Dumitriu, “Adrian Năstase.”

28 Dan Puric is a Romanian actor, known for his nationalist and Euroskeptic discourse promoted on certain TV Shows.

29 Tudor Gheorghe is a Romanian artist who, in December 2019, as a commemoration of three decades since the fall of communism in Romania, attended a show called “Degeaba 30” [In Vain 30] that was broadcasted on the Romanian Television (TVR). The title itself represents the quintessence of a general popular assumption among Romanians that “nothing has been done in the last 30 years of democracy.” However, apart from nationalist statements Tudor Gheorghe also roughly criticized the EU, stipulating that Romania “groans and waits for a decree from Brussels and Strasbourg.” See “Tot Degeaba [Still in Vain],” YouTube video, posted by “Tudor Gheorghe,” December 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGDc78XTr1s>.

30 Dragoș Dumitriu, “Dan Puric: Ne-am dus ca niște slugi în NATO și UE, tot ce e românesc trebuie să dispară!” [Dan Puric: We Went Like Servants in NATO and EU, Everything That Is Romanian Has to Disappear!], *Sputnik*, February 3, 2020, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20200203/29065737/Dan-Puric-Ne-am-dus-ca-nite-slugi-n-NATO-i-UE-tot-ce-e-romnesc-trebuie-s-dispar.html>.

SEEDING FRACTURES BETWEEN NATO AND THE EU

Another objective of the Kremlin’s malign influence in the form of sharp power, apart from undermining the role of NATO in Romania, consists of cultivating a series of fractures between the Alliance and its European ally, the EU.

Sputnik reports that the initiative to set up an EU army is a “clear expression of Brussels’ desire for independence from the United States” and “a first step towards the disintegration of NATO.” In this context, it is stipulated that the establishment of an EU army is a “German maneuver to militarily control the continent, after subjugating it economically and financially,” which is why French President Emmanuel Macron is labeled as Chancellor Merkel’s “geostrategic poodle.”³¹ However, distorting the US perspective on the EU, Sputnik states that “the provocative gestures of the US ambassadors in Chișinău and Bucharest would aim to encourage a nationalist, Euroskeptic and easily controllable discourse, useful to American interests,” a policy that would, among other things, “have a role in sharpening nationalist and Euroskeptic sentiments in Romania.”³² Also in the same anti-Western narrative, Donald Trump is associated with the former leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, and accused of triggering a *perestroika* in Europe, by which “the current liberal-democratic elites will be eliminated like the communists in 1989.”³³ Moreover, Trump is credited with “a political tendency to support political leaders who agree with his views,” such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński to “take command over the EU’s Franco-German engine.”³⁴

31 Ionuț Țene, “Armata UE: Un prim pas spre dezmembrarea NATO?” [The EU’s Army: A First Step Towards NATO’s Disruption?], *Sputnik*, January 28, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/columnists/20190128/24374402/Armata-UE-un-prim-pas-spre-dezmembrarea-NATO.html>.

32 Bogdan Duca, “De ce SUA și-ar dori resuscitarea naționalismului românesc?” [Why Does the US Wish the Romanian Nationalism’s Resuscitation], *Sputnik*, September 14, 2016, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20160914/9008979/nationalism-sua-romania.html>.

33 Octavian Racu, “Trump a dat start unei ‘perestroika’ în UE: sfârșitul liberalismului european” [Trump Has Started a ‘perestroika’ in the EU. The End of European Liberalism], *Sputnik*, June 15, 2018, <https://ro.sputnik.md/columnists/20180615/19875524/trump-perestroika-liberalism.html>.

34 Racu, “Trump a dat start unei ‘perestroika’ în UE.”

REPRODUCING THE KREMLIN'S "ALTERNATIVE" PERCEPTION OF NATO

When it comes to exerting its malign influence in the form of mimetic power in Romania, Putin's Russia opts for a rhetoric meant to promote the "alternative vision" of the Kremlin, both by disseminating a series anti-US and anti-NATO discourses and by branding itself as a legitimate member of the international community.

Sputnik quotes a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry that blamed the "cynicism" with which the US is involved in the domestic policy of the Republic of Moldova.³⁵ The statement is related to a letter signed by the US ambassador in Chişinău, who made a series of recommendations to Moldovan deputies on the new parliamentary majority and the future government. Similarly, referring to the situation in Ukraine, Washington is accused of "pushing Chişinău into blackmail" for the "only correct option," ignoring the "views of a large majority of Moldovan voters."³⁶ NATO is also labeled as "an outdated structure, a remnant of the Cold War," due to the fact that "it would maintain a tense state typical of that period to fulfill its role of imperialist-militarist organization," which "benefits only for certain power circles that consume huge budgets."³⁷ On the other hand, a delegation of deputies from the Russian State Duma stated that Russia has "friendly intentions," but also that "it has never started a war, but rather has responded to various aggressions."³⁸ In addition, there is evidence that a deputy who represents the Russian-Lipovan minority in the Parliament has tried to strengthen Russian-Romanian relations "at a level worthy of historical traditions."³⁹

Regarding NATO's presence on Romanian territory, the narrative directed against it also targeted the antimissile shield from Deveselu. Therefore, the Alliance ends up being accused of "propaganda" by which "it tries to convince the Romanian public opinion that an antimissile

shield is needed just because it says so."⁴⁰ Moreover, the Kremlin accuses NATO of "not keeping its promises following the withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), saying that the systems located at Deveselu also have the ability to launch Tomahawk cruise missiles," hence threatening Russia.⁴¹

SHAPING ROMANIAN ATTITUDES USING "LINKS" BETWEEN LOCAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE PRESENCE OF NATO BASES IN ROMANIA

The third approach related to the sharp power dimension of the Kremlin's malign influence in Romania focuses on exploiting the so-called links between local organized crime and the presence of NATO bases in Romania. The main narrative put forward emphasizes that human trafficking is employed to satisfy the sexual needs of NATO soldiers deployed in Romania, hence underlining the negative impact of the Alliance's bases within Romanian borders. The main example referred to by the Russian propaganda is the Caracal case.

The case in question involves the murder of a 15-year-old girl named Alexandra Măceşanu, who went missing in the town of Caracal on July 24, 2019. The girl disappeared while hitchhiking from her village Dobrosloveni to Caracal, having been kidnapped by a 65-year-old mechanic named Gheorghe Dincă, who raped, beat, and eventually killed her. The event sparked a huge emotional backlash in the country which, correlated with the late response from local law enforcement authorities (19 hours between the emergency call and the intervention), triggered widespread protests and caught the attention of international media. As a consequence, the case itself represented another incident the Kremlin could exploit, using its sharp power toolkit.

The crime scene—Caracal—is located five miles away from Deveselu, a commune located in Olt County that became well-known after NATO built one of its missile defense systems in Europe in 2015. In May 2016, the Aegis Ashore Missile Defense Complex became opera-

35 Octavian Racu, "Moscova: SUA se implică direct și cinic în politica internă a Moldovei" [Moscow: The US Are Directly and Cynically Involved in the Republic of Moldova's Domestic Policy], *Sputnik*, March 28, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/moldova/20190328/25316034/Moscova-SUA-se-implica-direct-cinic-politica-interna-Moldovei.html>.

36 Racu, "Moscova."

37 Racu, "Moscova."

38 Dragoş Dumitriu, "Adevăr și curaj: Omul lui Jirinovski a făcut praf NATO ... chiar la Bucureşti!" [Truth and courage: Zhirinovski's man destroyed NATO ... right at Bucharest], *Sputnik*, December 13, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/Rusia/20191213/28542645/Adevar-si-curaj-Omul-lui-Jirinovski-a-facut-praf-NATO-chiar-la-Bucuresti.html>.

39 Dumitriu, "Adevăr și curaj."

40 Dragoş Dumitriu, "Nici Moscova, nici isteriile pro-NATO nu pot ascunde cifrele reale de la Deveselu" [Neither Moscow, Nor pro-NATO Hysteria Cannot Hide the Real Numbers from Deveselu], *Sputnik*, February 8, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/International/20190208/24596258/Nici-Moscova-nici-isteriile-pro-NATO-nu-pot-ascunde-cifrele-reale-de-la-Deveselu.html>.

41 Dumitriu, "Nici Moscova, nici isteriile pro-NATO."

tional and a target of Russian propaganda in Romania. An article in Sputnik suggests a possible link between the tragedy in Caracal and the NATO military base in Deveselu, stipulating that “it is another sex scandal in which the US military troops are involved.”⁴² To substantiate this information, a report issued by the US Department of Defense is cited that gives “alarming figures” on “the involvement of American soldiers in sex scandals with minors.” This report is also connected with the extraction of 95 soldiers from Deveselu.⁴³ Such rhetoric also states that “Romania is on the first place not only in the delivery of girls for the human trafficking networks in the EU, but also in the trafficking of women for the NATO military troops.”⁴⁴ To support this claim, the article in question quotes a former translator from the American base, who reported that she received death threats from American soldiers in Deveselu once she began to inquire about the events that had taken place, declaring, at the same time, that “there would be a real brothel.”⁴⁵

However, Sputnik also tries to combat those who claim that the platform contributes to the dissemination of these narratives considered to be false. As such, “propagandists and manipulators by profession” are blamed for “reinterpreting the information linking the Caracal case to the US base in Deveselu” just to “attribute this to Putin regime’s propaganda.”⁴⁶

42 Dragoș Dumitriu, “Armata SUA, lovită oficial: agresiuni sexuale. ‘Un mic trafic de influență la București’” [The US Army officially hit: Sexual Aggression. ‘A Little Traffic of Influence to Bucharest’], Sputnik, August 2, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20190802/27107462/Armata-SUA-lovit-oficial-agresiuni-sexuale-Un-mic-trafic-de-influenta-la-Bucuresti.html>.

43 Dumitriu, “Armata SUA, lovită oficial: agresiuni sexuale.”

44 Dragoș Dumitriu, “Dosar FULMINANT – Bordel în baza SUA de la Kogălniceanu – legătură cu Caracal” [Fulminant Dossier - Brothel in the US Base from Kogălniceanu – ties with Caracal], Sputnik, January 23, 2020, <https://ro.sputnik.md/analytics/20200123/28950967/Dosar-Bordel-in-baza-SUA-de-la-Kogalniceanu-legatura-cu-Caracal.html>.

45 Dumitriu, “Dosar FULMINANT.”

46 Dragoș Dumitriu, “O minciună grosolană se promovează în cazul Deveselu – un fost ministru e implicat” [A Huge Lie is Promoted in Deveselu Case – an ex-Minister is involved], Sputnik, August 14, 2019, <https://ro.sputnik.md/politics/20190814/27233208/O-minciuna-grosolana-se-promoveaza-in-cazul-Deveselu--un-fost-ministru-e-implicat.html>.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we notice that Putin’s Russia exerts malign influence in Romania in all its three forms: sharp power, mimetic power, and dark power. Relating to the sharp power component, the Kremlin primarily aims to penetrate the Romanian political, social, and information environment by undermining NATO’s role in Romania, seeding fractures between NATO and the EU, and instrumentalizing the “links” between local organized crime and the presence of NATO bases in Romania. Consequently, between 2016 and 2020, Sputnik Romania-Moldova promoted a series of narratives such as the loss of the “gendarme of the planet” status by the US, the fall of Romania in the trap of “American war propaganda,” as well as attributed labels to the country like “CIA branch in the Balkans” or “Cuba of Europe.” Other narratives, like a potential “perestroika” launched by Donald Trump in the EU, a possible “resurrection of nationalism and Euroskepticism” by the US, and the “manifestation of independence” from NATO’s umbrella have also been instrumental in the process of manipulating Romanian public perceptions, by cultivating the idea that acute fractures indeed exist between the two poles of the Western world: NATO and the EU. Last but not least, the Kremlin exploited the emotional backlash triggered by the tragedy in Caracal to criticize the presence of NATO bases in Romania by making connections between local organized crime (which is involved in human trafficking) and “the needs” of NATO soldiers deployed in Romanian territory.

On the other hand, through mimetic power, Putin’s Russia tries to brand itself as a better alternative for Romania, while also blaming NATO’s expansion in Eastern Europe. Therefore, NATO is accused of “political interference” in Romania and expansion in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, is also considered a “structure outdated by the new international realities” positioned in Russia’s sphere of influence. At the same time, under the narrative of “responding to other aggressions,” Moscow promotes itself as a better “alternative” for Bucharest, taking into account that all its intentions are “friendly.” Thus, it is obvious that the Kremlin aims to enhance its relations with Bucharest using what it perceives as soft power techniques, even though this is not how the concept of soft power is generally defined.

When exerting its dark power techniques, Putin’s Russia promotes rhetoric meant to demonize NATO. As evidenced before, and related to Romania, the Kremlin

bullies both local pro-NATO policymakers who promote the common values and norms of the Alliance in Romania, and advocate for anti-Western critics who come from political or cultural spheres. In this sense, while the Deputy Secretary General of NATO Mircea Geoană is called a “fool” and a “weak man,” the US ambassador in Bucharest Adrian Zuckerman is blamed for sharing “fake” information regarding the benefits of Romania’s Strategic Partnership with the US, as well as for presenting “false” truths about the communist regime that ruled before 1989. By contrast, the statements of Adrian Năstase and Dan Puric are instrumental for the Kremlin’s capacity to diabolize the West, as both actors argued either that NATO “violated” its commitments to stop its “imperialist expansion” towards Eastern Europe or that everything “that is Romanian” must be “annihilated.”



**“OUR GREAT
NEIGHBOR RUSSIA”
CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL
BACKGROUND OF RUSSOPHILIA
IN GERMANY IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE “UKRAINIAN CRISIS”**

Kyrylo Tkachenko



**HISTORY
CULTURE**



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THE “UKRAINIAN CRISIS” IN THE LIGHT OF AUTHORITARIAN REACTION AND RETREAT OF THE WEST

In 1992, American philosopher Francis Fukuyama published the book *The End of History and the Last Man*. According to Fukuyama, the Soviet Union's defeat in the Cold War would lead to the gradual establishment of Western-oriented democratic regimes around the world. Global history had peaked and humanity's further progress would take place within what Fukuyama believed to be the best form of society's organization. While the American philosopher's statements faced considerable criticism, the phrase “the end of history” almost immediately took off. Indeed, the idea of “the end of history” can be perceived as a too-optimistic and somewhat naïve forecast, which many would want to take as fact. Moreover, it can be criticized as an ideological expression of the euphoria of those who emerged victorious from the Cold War. However, it should be kept in mind that the idea of “the end of history” was based on fundamental changes in global politics. It was not only in Eastern Europe that authoritarian regimes faced their end; throughout the 1990s, they fell in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia.¹ Meanwhile, the dominant position of the US seemed undeniable.

Following Fukuyama's phrasing, the changes in global politics after 2014 can be called “the end of ‘the

end of history.’” With China increasing its economic and military power, the United States' dominance no longer seems indisputable, and authoritarian regimes such as Putin's in the Russian Federation or Erdoğan's in Turkey have learned to oppose the West effectively. This new challenge of authoritarian regimes to the West is not limited to diplomatic tensions or propaganda directed at Western societies. It includes Russia's interference in electoral processes in the US and the UK, and military interventions to expand state borders (in Ukraine) or support other “anti-Western” authoritarian regimes (in Syria). In both of these cases, Russia's military intervention succeeded—in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, and its intervention in 2015 saved Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime from defeat in a brutal civil war. Both cases mark two important precedents. The annexation of Crimea was the first annexation on the European continent since World War II. Of course, state borders changed multiple times between 1945 and 2014 in Europe, and attempts at annexations took place in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, the first successful annexation in Europe following World War II certainly poses a greater threat to global security than, for example, the annexation of Tibet by China. In the case of Crimea's annexation, the crisis of the international security system is further aggravated by the fact that Ukraine had previously voluntarily given up an enormous arsenal of nuclear weapons inherited from the USSR in exchange for security guarantees (although these were not supported by specific commitments), including Russia's assurances that it would “respect the independence,

1 Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies throughout the World* (New York: Times Book, 2008).

sovereignty and existing borders” of Ukraine.²

The authoritarian reaction is accompanied by two distinctly linked phenomena that we could designate as the simultaneous *retreat* and *contraction* of the West. The Russian intervention in Syria did indeed set a new precedent. Retention of power by dictators despite large-scale protests in their country against the backdrop of diplomatic isolation by Western countries can hardly be called an exception; this happened several times during the period from 1991 to 2014. A new feature in Syria’s case was the retreat of the West following the intervention of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah (joined a bit later by Turkey, which occupied parts of northern Syria). In the case of Syria, the West’s retreat was literal—the reduction of the American military presence was provoked first by Russian and then Turkish interventions. The reduction of the military presence and the cessation of support for opposition to the Assad regime forces were accompanied by a retreat on the diplomatic front: after the Russian intervention in 2015, the number of diplomatic expressions of “concern” in connection with what was happening in Syria sharply decreased, and the proposed Obama administration plan to limit the activities of Assad’s aviation by establishing a flight-free zone in Syria was never discussed again.

Although the West’s response to Russia’s intervention in Ukraine cannot be called a retreat, it appears to be ambivalent in nature. On the one hand, no Western state has recognized the legitimacy of the annexation of Crimea; on the other hand, the policy of deterring Russia can be justifiably called a compromise. The sanctions imposed by the West are rather symbolic, and the implementation of joint projects such as Nord Stream 2 undermines their already limited economic efficiency.

The *retreat* of the West—its readiness to concede in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions—is accompanied by processes in the Western countries themselves that we refer to as the *contraction* of the West. This concept entails both the growth of nationalist, authoritarian, and conservative trends in Western countries themselves and the contradictions between them generated by this growth. These processes have led to the UK leaving the European Union and significant erosion of democratic institutions in EU member states such as Hungary and Poland. At the transatlantic level, Donald Trump’s rhetoric has called into question the United States’ readiness to meet its obli-

gations within NATO.

Naturally, democratic institutions in many Western countries may prove stronger and more resilient than some skeptics would like to believe (as demonstrated by the 2020 presidential election in the US). Furthermore, authoritarian regimes, including the ones in Russia and China, may turn out to have “feet of clay,” surprising bystanders with an unexpected, crushing fall following mass protests. In any case, it does make sense to highlight the existence and interlinkage of such trends as authoritarian responses and the West’s retreat/contraction. It is in this context that we should view the events known in the Western public discourse as “the Ukrainian crisis.” The 2014 anti-authoritarian revolution in Ukraine and Russia’s subsequent military intervention are part of a broader standoff. Opposing an authoritarian response requires coordinated simultaneous effort on many fronts, and Ukraine is undoubtedly among the most important ones. One of the reasons for the West’s ambivalent response to the events in Ukraine is the persistence of cultural and historic stereotypes connected with a lack of understanding of Ukraine’s history and of the nature of relations between Ukraine and Russia. In this article, we aim to show how Ukraine’s insufficient presence on the mental map of modern German society affected the perception of “the Ukrainian crisis” in Germany and led to the (relative) success of the Kremlin narrative. Since Eastern Europe remains one of the main areas of confrontation between the West and Russia, cultural work aimed at filling such “blank spots” as Ukraine and Belarus not only has obvious intrinsic value but is also essential to preparing comprehensive measures aimed at curbing the Kremlin’s revanchist actions effectively and for the long term.

SYMPTOMATIC ASPECTS OF THE RESPONSE TO THE EVENTS IN UKRAINE

In 2014, the most pro-Kremlin positions concerning the Ukrainian crisis on the German political landscape were occupied by the far left and the far right. Political heavyweights both in the ranks (represented in the Bundestag) of the far-left Die Linke (The Left) party and the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party accused the West of supporting “regime change” in Ukraine, “provoking” the annexation of Crimea, and generally pursuing an irresponsible, aggressive policy towards Russia. At the same time, left-wing politicians in the Bundestag did not hesitate to spread messages that

² Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_1994_1399.pdf.

Euromaidan was funded by USD 5 billion, that there is a “Joseph Goebbels party school” in Ukraine, and even that the trident on Ukraine’s national coat of arms is a Nazi symbol.³ Meanwhile, statements by leading AfD politicians demonstrated a high level of loyalty to Russian leadership, as well as anti-Americanism and Euroscepticism.

The convergence of rhetoric between the German far right and far left reached the point where the leading politician of Die Linke, Gregor Gysi, called for the division of spheres of influence between the US and Russia (evidently supporting Ukraine ending up in the Russian sphere of influence). Further, the leader of the far-right National Democratic Party, Udo Voigt, in his criticism of NATO and the US (which, according to him, provoked the annexation of Crimea), used rhetoric that was indistinguishable from the statements made by “anti-imperialists” and “pacifists” on the left.⁴ The same is true for popular left and right publications—after 2014, passages concerning Ukraine and Russia could be safely swapped without readers even noticing that they came from newspapers or magazines belonging to the opposite political camp. The same trend can be traced in the program documents for both parties, in the votes of Die Linke and AfD in the Bundestag and the European Parliament, and in symbolic actions, such as visits of representatives of both

parties to the occupied Crimea and Donbas.⁵ It should be noted that the pro-Russian stance is generally consistent with the attitudes dominant among the supporters of Die Linke and AfD. According to one opinion poll conducted in 2016, the supporters of both parties place higher levels of trust in Vladimir Putin more than in Angela Merkel (supporters in other parties in the Bundestag do not share these high levels of trust in Putin).⁶

In 2014-2015, the convergence of interpretations of “the Ukrainian crisis” among the far left and the far right became especially noticeable for German society in connection with the so-called Monday Demonstrations (*Montagdemos*). The organizers and the participants claimed to be rallying “for peace”; however, the general attitudes of the Monday Demonstrations were pro-Russian and anti-Western. The main initiators of the “new peace movement” were two adherents of conspiracy theories and one far-right publicist. However, the Monday Demonstrations attracted more than just right-wing supporters. An opinion poll showed that the largest faction among the participants was actually the voters of Die Linke.⁷ Despite the notoriety of the movement initiators (one of them was known for overt antisemitism⁸), Die Linke representatives up to and including Bundestag members

3 Speech by co-chair of the Die Linke faction Sahra Wagenknecht in Bundestag, 07.07.2016; speech by co-chair of the Die Linke faction Dietmar Bartsch in the talk show *Maybrit Illner*, 23.10.2014; press release by a Die Linke member Wolfgang Gehrke (Sahra Wagenknecht, Die agilsten Gegner Europas sitzen heute in Brüssel, <http://www.sahra-wagenknecht.de/de/article/2391.die-agilsten-gegner-europas-sitzen-inbr%C3%Bcssel.html>; Dietmar Bartsch, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gXkpu4TiBA>; Wolfgang Gehrke, Pressemitteilung vom 15.09.2014, <http://linksfraktion.de/pressemitteilungen/nato-manoever-nazi-symbolen-sofort-beenden>; <http://archive.fo/JegGH>).

4 This includes, among other things, numerous presentations by Udo Voigt in the European Parliament, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GU8dPHI8M04>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLNxKV3fPrs>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnvr2sW-n9Y>.

5 To find out more about the visits of AfD representatives to Crimea and Donbass, see Marlene Laurelle, Ellen Rivera, *Collusion or Homegrown Collaboration? Connections between German Far Right and Russia* (Political Capital, 2019), 16-19, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344221694_Collusion_or_Homegrown_Collaboration_Connections_between_German_Far_Right_and_Russia_Political_Capital_Budapest/link/5f5d6ef34585154dbbce103f/download. To find out more about the visits of Die Linke representatives to Crimea and Donbass, see Anton Shekhovtsov, “German Die Linke delegation visits right-wing terrorists in Eastern Ukraine,” Anton Shekhovtsov’s Blog, February 19, 2015, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2015/02/german-die-linke-delegation-visits.html>. For a detailed analysis of the role of the far right as “election observers,” see Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 101-131.

6 “Viele Anhänger von AfD und Die Linke vertrauen Putin mehr als Merkel [Many AfD and Die Linke Supporters Trust Putin More than Merkel],” *Die Zeit*, August 31, 2016, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-08/wladimir-putin-deutschland-afd-anhaenger-vertrauen>.

7 Priska Daphi et. al., *Occupy Frieden: Eine Befragung der Teilnehmer/innen der “Mahwachen für Frieden”* [Occupy Peace: A Survey of Participants of „Demonstrations for Peace“] (Berlin: Technische Universität, 2014), 21, <https://depositonce.tu-berlin.de/bitstream/11303/5260/3/occupy-frieden.pdf>.

8 Ken Jebsen, “Die Terrorlüge wird 10 Jahre alt [The Fiction about the Terrorist Attack Turns Ten],” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTG5F5vHna8&t=215s>; Ken Jebsen, “Zionistischer Rassismus [Zionist Racism],” <https://archive.org/details/KenfZionistischerRassismus> sOperGuenther-Grass; Ken Jebsen, “Kai-ROH”, <http://archive.is/ekOPz>.

participated in Monday Demonstrations.⁹ To explain the phenomenon of convergence of foreign policy preferences of the extreme left and the extreme right in 2014, the German press returned to the forgotten concept of *Querfront* literally meaning “front askew”—a concept that denoted the idea (and practice) of an alliance between the extreme left and the extreme right during the Weimar Republic. Understanding the new contours of convergence between the extreme left and extreme right in modern Germany has been the subject of numerous publications, and few German experts will be surprised by the similarity in interpretations of the poisoning of Alexey Navalny between Die Linke and AfD representatives (which sometimes go as far as to imply that the US may be behind the incident).¹⁰

Affinity with authoritarian regimes (not only the Russian one) among the far left, which only intensified after 2014, again reveals the anti-democratic tendencies characteristic of the radical left; this affinity is largely based on the resentment generated by historic trauma due to the collapse of communist regimes.¹¹ While pro-Russian sentiment has long existed in the left-wing circles, these attitudes became mainstream among the German far right only recently, with the “Ukrainian crisis” becoming one of the biggest catalysts. In its attempts to destabilize the European Union, the Kremlin mainly relies on the far right. There are reasonable suspicions that the Kremlin may be involved in the financing of AfD.¹² The Russia-funded German-language TV channel RT-Deutsch has repeatedly participated in information campaigns promoting the AfD agenda.¹³ Moreover, of all the German parties, the AfD delegations receive the warmest recep-

tion in Moscow.¹⁴

However, it would be erroneous to limit the scope of positive sentiment for Russia exclusively to the far left and far right camps, or to explain them away solely through adherence to their respective ideologies. Pro-Russian sentiments can also be encountered among representatives of other German parties, though to a much lesser extent. In modern Germany, pro-Russian sentiments are scattered across the political spectrum from the far left to the far right, peaking at those seeming opposites. Understanding the specific German manifestations of Rus-sophilia requires not so much an appeal to ideological preferences as cultural and historical contextualization.

How “normal” are pro-Russian positions in the context of political debates in modern Germany? We have already mentioned the statement by Dietmar Bartsch, the co-chair of the Die Linke parliamentary faction, in which he alleges the existence of a “Goebbels party school” in Ukraine. This message was repeated, in a slightly different form, by another leading Die Linke politician, Gregor Gysi, and was also mentioned in a request of the parliamentary faction to the German government.¹⁵ Dietmar Bartsch made his statement during a popular talk show on a taxpayer-funded channel. Yet his remark was not subject to criticism: no one conducted fact-checking, and with the exception of a critical comment in the personal English-language blog of Andreas Umland, the German media did not respond to it in any way.¹⁶ This situation

9 Martin Niewendick, “Verschwörungstheoretiker, Linke und Neonazis gegen Gauck [Conspiracy Theorists, the Left and the Neo-Nazi Against Gauck],” *Der Tagesspiegel*, 13.12.2014, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/demo-friedenswinter-in-berlin-verschwoerungstheoretiker-linke-und-neonazis-gegen-gauck/11116944.html>.

10 “Fall Alexej Nawalny: Die fragwürdigen Thesen von Linken und Rechten [The Case of Alexey Navalny: Questionable Statements of the Left and the Right],” *T-Online*, 05.09.2020, https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/innenpolitik/id_88522402/fall-alexej-nawalny-die-fragwuerdigen-thesen-von-linken-und-rechten.html.

11 Kyrylo Tkachenko, *Pravi dveri zlyva: Nimets’ka radykal’ na lyvitsya I revolyutsiya ta viyna v Ukraini, 2013-2018 roky* [Right Door on the Left: the German Radical Left and the Revolution and War in Ukraine, 2013-2018] (Київ: Критика, 2019), 44-48.

12 Michael Laczynsky, “Russland-Connection: Auch AfD soll profitiert haben [Ties with Russia: AfD, Too, Probably Received Financial Support],” *Die Presse*, 26.11.2014, <https://www.diepresse.com/4605451/russland-connection-auch-afd-soll-profitiert-haben>.

13 Laurelle, Rivera, *Collusion*, 12-14. For a detailed analysis of the support of the Western extreme right by media close to the Kremlin, see Shekhovtsov, *Russia*, 132-154.

14 “Die AfD zu Besuch im Kreml [AfD Received in the Kremlin],” *Deutsche Welle*, 08.12.2020, <https://www.dw.com/de/die-afd-zu-besuch-im-kreml/a-55874686>.

15 Gysi’s version is about the “Goebbels research center,” and the parliamentarian request claimed the existence of a “Goebbels party school” (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ehre-von-partei-ehre-verletzt-svoboda-nationalisten-zeigen-gysi-an/10049208.html>; <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/029/1802960.pdf/>). The real story is about only the Livejournal page of the user *nachtigal88*. The username refers to the battalion of Ukrainian collaborators during World War II and uses the neo-Nazi code “88” (which stands for Heil Hitler). The account belongs to a former MP from the far-right all-Ukraine Union “Svoboda,” Yuriy Mykhalchyshyn. According to Tadeusz Olszanski, this account was first created in 2005 as the “Joseph Goebbels Center for Political Studies,” and was later renamed into “Ernst Junger Center for Political Studies.” See <https://www.osw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2011-07-05/svoboda-party-new-phenomenon-ukrainian-right-wing-scene>. Since 2011, this account is almost inactive. On his LJ page, Yuriy Mykhalchyshyn did publish translations of works by Joseph Goebbels and other national socialists. For some time, he was deputy head of the Lviv regional party organization for political education. However, despite the eye-catching name, the activity of this account between 2005 and 2011 cannot constitute sufficient grounds to claim that there was a “Goebbels party school” in Ukraine in 2014.

16 Andreas Umland, “Bartsch Alleges on German TV Existence of Ukrainian Joseph Goebbels’ Government Party School,” *Andreas Umland’s blog*, 13.12.2015, <http://umland.livejournal.com/197212.html>.

can hardly be called normal. It is hard to imagine a similar statement remaining without response if it were about France, Poland, or Russia. A politician daring to make such a claim would face grave criticism and accusations of misunderstanding of the very idea of historic responsibility to other countries. Most likely, such a politician would have to apologize for spreading information that is not only false, but also harmful to Germany's friendly relations with other European states.

Indeed, we are talking not only about statements made by the far left and the far right that are similar to the Kremlin interpretations, but also about the specific German context in which such claims are "permissible." For instance, the Frankfurter *Allgemeine Zeitung*, an ostensibly conservative newspaper, published an article supporting the legitimacy of Crimea's annexation "from the standpoint of international law."¹⁷ In another article, Kerstin Holmes, a regular reporter of this newspaper, called Sevastopol "the supporting pillar of Russian statehood" and blamed the West for Crimea's annexation.¹⁸ The left liberal newspaper *Die Zeit* published an author who considered the existence of the Ukrainian state nothing more than "a misunderstanding of the former USSR's national policy" and wondered "why should we forever shun the possibility of separation of eastern and western Ukraine?"¹⁹ The author failed to explain where the border would be located in this case, or to mention that there is a huge central region between western and eastern Ukraine. What is more, the author did not even wonder whether the residents of eastern Ukraine themselves would be in favor of this development (even though surveys have been conducted, and the findings are easily available).²⁰ The same newspaper published

an interview with former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, in which he argued that Ukraine is not a nation-state. Making this claim, he referred to history: "There is no consensus among historians about whether the Ukrainian nation exists at all."²¹ (The former chancellor failed to mention what historians he was referring to.) Another influential German newspaper, far removed both from the extreme left and the extreme right camps, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, sometimes publishes articles calling Ukraine "the heart of Russia" and claiming that "notorious anti-Semites" could be found in the Ukrainian transitional government.²² What would seem to be one of the most unacceptable articles on the topic of the "Ukrainian crisis" has been published in the reputable magazine *Spiegel*. In the article, the standard musings about the West provoking Russia are "deepened" by a look into the history of the Crimean Peninsula with non-critical reproduction of the accusations used to justify the deportation of Crimean Tatars back in 1944. The article is illustrated with a picture of modern Crimean Tatars photographed so as to make them appear to be doing the "Roman salute."²³

A full list of statements in tune with Kremlin propaganda published in German "quality media" would take up way more space. This being said, it would be unfair to accuse the entire German press of bias. Most of the articles referenced above received critical responses (often published in the same outlets as the criticized articles and written by competent historians specializing in Eastern Europe). It should also be noted that compared to 2014, the situation has changed for the better. It is also a good sign that the issue described can mostly be observed in popular media, as opposed to professional academic papers dedicated to the history, politics, and society of Eastern Europe (the evolution in the popular press is likely attributable to the influence of publications in academic

17 Reinhard Merkel, "Kühle Ironie der Geschichte [The Cold Irony of History]", Frankfurter Allgemeine, 08.04.2014, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/die-krim-und-das-voelkerrecht-kuehle-ironie-der-geschichte-12884464.html?fref=gc>.

18 Kerstin Holms, "Lesen Sie Putins Stellenbeschreibung [Read Putin's Job Description]", Frankfurter Allgemeine, 12.09.2014, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/ukraine-krise-lesen-sie-putins-stellenbeschreibung-13148481.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2.

19 Jörg Baberowski, "Zwischen den Imperien [Between Empires]", Zeit Online, 13.03.2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/12/westenrusslandkonflikt-geschichte-ukraine/komplettansicht>.

20 To read more about pro-autonomy sentiment in Donbas before 2014, see Andriy Zotkin, "Stavlennya do instytutu regional'nykh avtonomiy ta perspektyvy detsentralizatsii derzhavnoi vlady v Ukraini [Attitude to the Institution of Regional Autonomies and the Prospects of Decentralization of Government in Ukraine]," *Monitoring sotsial'nykh zmin* 1/15 (2014), 219-227. One of the most recent detailed studies of the foreign policy preferences of Ukrainian residents (which recorded regional differences) was held by the School of Political Analysis at NaUKMA, https://sapiens.com.ua/publications/socpol-research/121/pres_05.05_Donbas_Crimea_fin.pdf.

21 Matthias Naß, "Putins Vorgehen ist verständlich [Putin's Behavior is Understandable]", Zeit Online, 27.03.2014, <https://www.zeit.de/2014/14/helmut-schmidt-russland/komplettansicht>.

22 Erhard Eppler, "Putin, Mann fürs Böse [Putin, Playing the Bad Guy]", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 11.03.2014, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/russlands-praesident-wladimir-putin-mann-fuers-boese-1.1909116-0#seite-2>.

23 Uwe Klußmann, "Nationalisten stiften Tatern zu Anschlägen an [Nationalists Incite Crimean Tatars to Engage in Acts of Terrorism]", *Spiegel Online*, 28.02.2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/krim-krise-nationalisten-stiften-tataren-zu-anschlaegen-an-a-956033.html>. The picture that was used by Spiegel for illustration has been replaced with a different one. A copy of the original publication is available at <https://archive.is/AJfyz>.

journals).²⁴

The real trouble in the German media landscape is not the existence of isolated pro-Russian comments. As noted by Andrii Portnov, what is problematic about the German debate on the nature of the “Ukrainian crisis” is the very framework in which it takes place—a set of not-always-interpreted-yet-quickly-established ideas about what positions are acceptable and what can be deemed “normal.”²⁵ This framework is based on a particular interpretation of the standard of “balance,” which posits that the Kremlin version of the events in Ukraine are worthy of being represented alongside the “opposing point of view.” As a result, supporters of Russian intervention in Ukraine are offered the opportunity to publish their articles and give interviews for major German outlets that cannot be accused of affiliation with the far left or far right. Thus, in 2014, the framework of the discussion was set as if two equally legitimate narratives represented two alternative versions of what was happening in Ukraine. The same idea of “balance” and “neutrality” is reflected in established notions, in the way the semantic framework of perception of the “Ukrainian crisis” is set. The aggressor and the victim are called “parties to the conflict,” and the term “Russian-Ukrainian war” is rarely used, with a clear preference for more “objective” and “neutral” notions, such as “the conflict in Eastern Ukraine” or “civil war.” Even when it became obvious who the “little green men” occupying Crimea really were, the German press behaved as if the Kremlin needed to issue an official confirmation before they could start calling a spade a spade. Even writing about battles that the Ukrainian army lost to Russian regular troops (Izvaryne, Ilovaisk, Debaltseve), the German press still referred to “separatists” and “rebels.” The same logic of “balance” evidently also applies to Flight MH17 of Malaysia Airlines. According to reports in the German press, the plane was shot down by “separatists” or “rebels.” For example, the lead of the article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about the start of the trial in The Hague was “Four Pro-Russian Rebels Accused of

24 Kateryna Zarembo, Marianna Fshkurdinova, “Ukraina yak obstavyna: dyskursywny analiz nazyvannya ta obramlennya rosiys’ko-ukrains’koho konfliktu v nimets’kykh naukovo-analitychnykh kolakh [Ukraine as a Circumstance: the Discursive Analysis of the Naming and Framing of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict in German Academic and Analytical circles],” Volodymyr Kulyk (ed.), *Interpretatsii rosiys’ko-ukrains’koho konfliktu v zakhidnykh naukovykh i ekspertno-analitychnykh pratsyakh* (Kyiv: Instytut politychnykh i etnonatsional’nykh doslidzhen’, 2020), 99–127.

25 Andriy Portnov, “Neither admiration, nor fear: Stereotypes about Ukraine in Germany,” Volodymyr Yermolenko (ed.), *Ukraine in Histories and Stories: Essays by Ukrainian Intellectuals* (Kyiv: Internews Ukraine, 2019), 276, 284.

Shooting Down Flight MH-17” (though the article itself makes it clear that three out of the four accused are Russian citizens).²⁶ The same “balance” can be seen in German talk shows. When Ukraine became an important news item in 2014, representatives of the nominal Kremlin point of view became mandatory guests of TV studios. It is important to note that the discussions about the “Ukrainian crisis” started without Ukrainian representatives at all—the idea that they also had to be invited to talk shows did not emerge right away.²⁷

It must be noted that this “balance” towards Ukraine is exceptional in the German press. It would hardly occur to any German journalist to call the Spanish conquest of Mexico “a civil war.” And this despite the fact that the troops led by Hernan Cortés were overwhelmingly composed of indigenous people, and his military expedition took place against the will of the Spanish governor (not to mention the fact that in 1519, the peoples under the rule of the Aztecs had better reasons for dissatisfaction than the inhabitants of the Donbas in 2014). It would never occur to anyone to justify the annexation of Tibet by saying that China managed to accomplish it (almost) without bloodshed. German Minister of Economy Sigmar Gabriel, who equated Russian-speaking residents of Ukraine with ethnic Russians in an interview, would hardly make the same mistake about the German-speaking population of Switzerland (and if he did, we can only imagine the denunciation in the German press, let alone the consequences for his continued political career).²⁸ And, save for some completely marginal neo-Nazis, no one would try to justify Germany’s right to interfere in Austria’s internal affairs based on the fact that the majority of its population speaks German (about three times the percentage of Ukrainian citizens who mostly speak Russian).²⁹ It is also hardly possible to imagine a discussion of events in Kuwait in 1990 or in Syria in 2014 with Saddam Hus-

26 “Vier prorussische Rebellen werden für Abschuss des Fluges MH17 angeklagt, [Four Pro-Russian Rebels Accused of Shooting Down Flight MH17]” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19.06.2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/mh17-russland-flugzeug-ukraine-1.4492122>.

27 Andriy Portnov, “Informatsiyna viyna proty Ukrainy: Pohlyad z Berlinu [Information War against Ukraine. A View from Berlin],” *Historians*, 23.10.2014, <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/avtorska-kolonka/1352-andrii-portnov-informatsiina-viina-proty-ukrainy-pohliad-z-berlina-povna-versiia>.

28 “Gabriel plädiert für Föderalisierung der Ukraine” [Gabriel Advocates Federalization of Ukraine], *Welt*, 23.08.2014, <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article131513129/Gabriel-plaediert-fuer-Foederalisierung-der-Ukraine.html>.

29 Larysa Masenko, “Movna sytuatsiya Ukrainy v sotsiolingvistychnykh vymirakh [Language Situation in Ukraine in Sociolinguistic Terms],” *Paizjo Svoboda*, 01.05.2020, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30586236.html>.

sein's or ISIS' representatives invited to the studio to present their "alternative" point of view. It is obvious that the notion of "balance" in the German press is not something universally applied, but rather depends on which points of view are deemed acceptable in each specific case.

How is it that ways of argumentation that are inadmissible in other contexts can be easily applied to Ukraine? The set of problems that lead to Ukrainian events being interpreted in accordance with Kremlin propaganda can be grouped around a few root issues, described below.

First, we are talking about German society's long-established mental map of Eastern Europe. Changes to this mental map occur very slowly, and it is still full of blind spots, Ukraine being one of the largest. This problem is further compounded by the Russian imperial legacy, which still significantly affects the perception of Ukraine in Germany.

Second, the version of historical memory that dominates in German society has a significant impact, namely, how it remembers the military aggression of the Third Reich in the East. In the historical memory of German society, a huge undifferentiated "Russia," which begins immediately east of Poland, was both the main object of the Nazi invasion and the country that made the greatest sacrifice (in terms of numbers of casualties) and the greatest contribution to the victory over the Nazis. Unfortunately, at the same time, one can trace the tendency to identify Ukrainians as Nazi collaborators. It cannot be said with certainty that this second trend is dominant, but it is present, and its presence significantly influences the debate around the "Ukrainian crisis." Comparing the perception of the role of Russia and the Ukrainians in World War II, we can speak about a complex compromise in German national education that allows, on the one hand, an acceptance of responsibility for the terrible times, but, on the other hand, latently allows the shift of some of the most severe elements of responsibility onto others. And the absence of Ukraine on the traditional mental map of Eastern Europe makes it an ideal target for such historical projections.

The first of the sources we have identified for the view of Ukraine as twisted and distorted by the Russian imperial legacy manifests itself in a variety of ways and can be quantified in some cases. To this day, even in the most respectable German publications, the terms Russia and Soviet Union are often used interchangeably. Such a simplification is by no means neutral, and in the debates around the "Ukrainian crisis," there are tangible negative consequences (for the Ukrainian side). However, within the German public discourse, this dehumanization is still

not perceived as problematic—the debate on its legitimacy seems to be confined to historians dealing with Eastern Europe.

Another symptomatic manifestation of German society's habitual mental map of Eastern Europe is the still-widespread designation of Russia as a "neighbor" or "neighbor country."³⁰ The border between Germany and Russia has not existed for over a hundred years. The border between Prussia and the Russian Empire was formed after the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century (with the participation of the Habsburg monarchy) and remained until World War I. The short-term joint occupation of the interwar Polish Republic by the Third Reich and the Soviet Union in 1939-41 can be considered a kind of historical replica of the partitions of Poland (in any case, some Polish commentators are inclined to this interpretation). Of course, the use of the popular image of Russia as a "neighbor" is most likely motivated not so much by a desire to whiten the dark pages of history, but, on the contrary, by a sense of responsibility before history and a desire to preserve peace on the European continent. However, the problematic nature of this geographic metaphor becomes apparent when viewed side-by-side with other countries. For example, Slovakia and Romania also share no common border with Germany. Yet, despite the fact that they are located closer than Russia, it is not customary to call them "neighbors" in Germany. Pronouncing Belarus or Ukraine "neighbors" will sound even harsher to the German ear. And although Minsk and Kyiv are about half the distance from Berlin as Moscow, we see that in this case, factual geographic parameters do not affect the perception that these countries are not "neighbors."

In this context, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is not used to "identify" the Putin regime with the Stalin regime or the sentiments present in German society today with the sentiments of the Germans during the Third Reich. It is

30 Some examples of this use: Angela Merkel, "Russland ist unser Nachbar [Russia is our Neighbor]", Bayerischer Rundfunk, 25.12.2017, <https://www.br.de/mediathek/video/angela-merkel-russland-ist-unser-nachbar-v:5a3c62ffc9656300184257ec>; Gerhard Schröder, "Verglichen mit Trump können wir froh sein, einen Putin zu haben [If We Compare the Situation with Trump, We Should be Happy to Have Putin]", ZEIT Online, 15.11.2017, <https://www.zeit.de/2017/47/gerhard-schroeder-spd-bundestagswahlvladimir-putin-donald-trump/komplettansicht>; Katja Gloger, "Russland: Der schwierige Nachbar [Russia: a Complicated Neighbor]", Handelsblatt, 06.10.2017, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/deutschland-und-der-russland-komplex-der-schwierige-nachbar/20406708.html?ticket=ST-2249836-14zt0BMeuJvqvxgSnGhV-ap1>; Michael Stürmer, "Putin bleibt unser aller unheimlicher Nachbar [Putin Remains Our Most Difficult Neighbor]", Welt, 16.04.2015, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article139668414/Putin-bleibt-unser-aller-unheimlicher-Nachbar.html>.

purely a matter of historical contextualization. Ignoring the interests of “small” peoples can both be an element of brutal predatory plans (as during World War I) and can also acquire milder forms generated by a specific understanding of politics aimed at establishing long-term peace (as in the post-war period). Examples of the latter include the refusal to support Polish Solidarity in the 1980s, a refusal motivated primarily by the desire not to provoke the Soviet Union and to continue to adhere to the policy of “détente” initiated by the FRG government (in essence, recognizing Poland as a legitimate zone of influence of the USSR). Germany’s further support for the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline after the events of 2014 (and against the will of many Eastern European states) also applies to the second case. To this day, the German government has been ignoring its eastern neighbors’ arguments that before the Nord Stream gas pipeline was built (bypassing Ukraine), Russia could not afford large-scale military action against Ukraine for economic reasons and that the construction of Nord Stream 2 finally freed Russia from the risk that new aggression on its part would obstruct gas supplies through Ukraine.

In another symptomatic metaphor often used by German politicians and journalists, Ukraine is described as “a bridge between Russia and Europe.”³¹ Of course, this comparison, albeit somewhat naïve, is undoubtedly based on entirely peaceful intentions. The bridge metaphor, however, implies a whole set of negative stereotypes. First, contrary to geographic evidence, the image implies that Ukraine is not part of Europe. Further, the position from which this comparison is made is objectifying and instrumental. There are full-fledged actors on the world scene, and then, on the other end of the spectrum, there is a dumb subject designed to provide convenience. Bridges do not talk, do not move, they cannot have feelings or desires—they exist solely to be used by others. What’s more, the doom of being a bridge in no way relieves the country from the threats of war and occupation. The bridge can be used by military people without insignia, tanks, and air defense systems capable of shooting down passenger aircraft at an altitude of ten

31 Some examples of this use: “Die Ukraine muss doch eine Brücke sein [Ukraine Should Be a Bridge]”, *Die Tageszeitung*, 22.03.2014, <http://www.taz.de/!375672/>; Theo Sommer, “Die Ukraine kann nur als Brücke zwischen Ost und West überleben [Ukraine Can Only Survive as a Bridge Between East and West]”, *ZEIT Online*, 11.03.2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014-03/krim-ukraine-russland>; Karl Walter, “Ukraine kann zur Brücke werden [Ukraine Can Become a Bridge]”, *Merkur*, 21.03.2014, <https://www.merkur.de/lokales/dachau/landkreis/ukraine-ort29611/ukraine-kannbruecke-werden-3429294.html>.

thousand meters.

We provided just a few examples of how Russia and Ukraine are reflected in the collective mind of modern German society. The extent to which these linguistic trends have taken root in the German public discourse demonstrates the problematic and archaic nature of the traditional mental map of Eastern Europe. And although Ukraine was weakly present on this map until recently, strong, ingrained prejudices are associated with it.

Every Ukrainian who finds himself in Germany will sooner or later face the question of whether the Ukrainian language is an independent language or a dialect of Russian. If you briefly explain the situation and, in turn, ask the interlocutor why he or she came up with such a question, invariably he or she is unable to recall the source of the statement of the “dialectal nature” of the Ukrainian language. This is not just a matter of similarity—of course, Russian and Ukrainian are related languages (and naming a particular language a “dialect” is not so much a scientific definition as a political statement). All Slavic languages are more or less close to each other, and among them, Slovak and Belarusian are closer to Ukrainian than to Russian. But in Germany, no one will ask you if the Ukrainian language is a dialect of Belarusian, or Slovak a dialect of Ukrainian. The determining factor for such questions is not linguistic affinity, but the perception of the history of the Eastern European region, which is still largely viewed through the lens of the Russian imperial heritage. And the same German who asks you this question has sufficient linguistic and historical knowledge (not to mention cultural sensitivity) to know not to ask a Dutchman or a Dane whether their languages are just dialects of German.

Most German journalists who have written about Ukraine have, at best, been to Moscow, and know Ukraine only from short visits. The situation has improved somewhat since 2014, but the problem remains today. To be sure, the mainstream media in Germany, as well as throughout the world, is going through hard times. However, while the opening of new offices abroad and the development of the correspondent network can still be justified by financial constraints, the same does not apply to language learning. For a German who has already learned Russian, it will not be difficult to learn Ukrainian as well. However, few German journalists appear to have been able to do this. The realization that command of the Ukrainian language will be an effective barrier to the unwitting dissemination of false reports about Ukraine does not seem to have come yet (and misinformation was re-

produced by such serious publications as *Der Spiegel*).³²

Toponymy is another striking example of how the Russian imperial legacy sways the German view of Ukraine. While the German language is quickly adapting to the post-colonial order, changing traditional colonial place names to indigenous ones, in the case of Ukraine, seemingly insurmountable obstacles arise. In German, many Ukrainian toponyms are still transcribed in their Russian form, for example, "Dnjepr," "Kiew," "Odessa." And although a few years ago the reputable dictionary of the German language *Duden* recorded the Ukrainian-oriented version "Kyjiw" alongside the more traditional one, it is still not used in the German press, and there is no discussion about the need to change the Ukrainian geographical names borrowed from the Russian language.

This status quo in German contrasts sharply with developments in English, where "Kyiv" already appears to prevail over the former "Kiev." It seems to us that this sensitivity in the English-speaking environment is not least due to the longer and deeper work with Ukrainian themes in the English-speaking world. The Harvard Institute for Ukrainian Studies has been in existence for over forty years. Seven Canadian universities host various centers, institutes, and archives dedicated exclusively to Ukrainian studies. And even distant Australia, with a population about a quarter that of Germany, has two separate institutes dedicated to Ukrainian studies.

By contrast, in Germany, until recently, there was only a "half-department" of Ukrainian studies (the department of Polish and Ukrainian studies at the University of Greifswald). Only recently has a full-fledged department, completely devoted to the study of the history of Ukraine, appeared in Germany (at the Viadrina University in Frankfurt (Oder)). This sad state of Ukrainian studies in Germany is both the cause and the manifestation of a narrowed view of Ukraine.

How do the issues we have identified affect the political agenda in Germany? The most obvious influence of stereotypes associated with Russia and Ukraine is evident in the activities of the extreme left and extreme right forces. However, the total electoral support of these forces in

the last elections to the Bundestag (2017) did not exceed 22 percent and is unlikely to be higher in the next elections (2021). These forces are not represented in the German government and have little influence on its decisions. As mentioned, however, these stereotypes are not limited to the extreme ends of the political spectrum. Politicians who "understand Russia" can be found in the ranks of practically all German parties represented in the Bundestag. This is especially true of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Although its electoral support has declined significantly in recent years, it came in second in the last Bundestag elections and is part of the ruling coalition. Former Minister of Economy (2013-2017) and of Foreign Affairs (2017-2018) Sigmar Gabriel is a member of the SPD and his statements in the spirit of "understanding Russia" were not limited to the identification of Russian-speaking and ethnic Russians that we mentioned.³³ And while the former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had no significant influence on his party at the time of the interview cited above, the same cannot be said for another former chancellor from the SPD, Gerhard Schröder. Lobbying the interests of the Russian Federation in Germany, Schröder repeatedly operated with stereotypes that are the subject of our article, including those based on a complete disregard of historical facts (for example, when the ex-chancellor argued that Crimea was an "ancient Russian land").³⁴ A certain influence of these stereotypes can be traced even in the statements of Angela Merkel, who, for example, used the metaphor of Russia as "our neighbor."³⁵ The influence of the Russian narrative on German politicians is also confirmed by Ukrainian diplomats. For example, Yehor Cherniev, head of the Verkhovna Rada delegation to the NATO parliamentary assembly, characterizes communication with German colleagues as difficult. According to him, in the case of Nord Stream 2, the German position is influenced not only by considerations of a purely economic nature, but further, "communication with our German partners shows their rather deep relationship with the Russian Federation. They are pragmatic

32 One of the articles in *Der Spiegel* claimed that Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk referred to the inhabitants of Donbas as "Untermenschen." Yatsenyuk himself did not claim this, and apparently, German journalists, in this case, used Yatsenyuk's "free translation" in Russian sources (Benjamin Bidder, Moritz Gathmann, "Die Pöbler von Kiew," *Spiegel Online*, 17.06.2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/kiewus-aussenminister-beschimpft-putin-a-975536.html>). In private correspondence with the author of this article, one of the authors of the article in *Der Spiegel* argued that the lack of knowledge of the Ukrainian language was not an obstacle for competent journalism regarding Ukraine.

33 Claudia von Salzen, "Beziehung zu Russland: Gabriel ist als Außenminister kaum noch tragbar [Relations with Russia: Gabriel is Failing as a Foreign Minister]," *Der Tagesspiegel*, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/beziehungen-zu-russland-gabriel-ist-als-aussenminister-kaum-noch-tragbar/20984494.html>.

34 "Altkanzler Schröder verteidigt russische Annexion der Krim [Ex-Chancellor Schröder Defends the Russian Annexation of Crimea]," *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 14.06.2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/ex-bundeskanzler-schroeder-verteidigt-russische-annexion-der-krim-16236234.html>.

35 Angela Merkel, "Russland ist unser Nachbar," *Bayerischer Rundfunk*, 25.12.2017, <https://www.br.de/mediathek/video/angela-merkel-russland-ist-unser-nachbar-av:5a3c62ffc9656300184257ec>.

and not easily influenced by our position. [...] In addition, deeper relationships are revealed. For example, the German partners read between the lines: we bear the blame for World War II before the Russian Federation.³⁶ At the same time, the Ukrainian parliamentarian confirms that with regard to Ukraine, the same logic of historical responsibility does not work among the German diplomats. Ukrainian ambassadors to Germany and Austria Andrii Melnyk and Oleksandr Shcherba have made similar observations.³⁷ In other words, the aforementioned stereotypes have a clear influence on politics and thus represent a problem that needs to be addressed.

How could the negative stereotypes associated with Ukraine be broken? In the case of Germany, the answer seems clear. With regard to the necessary profound changes in social attitudes, we are talking primarily about greater attention to the history of Eastern European “small peoples” in school curricula, the development of Ukrainian studies, and the expansion of the correspondent network of German media in Ukraine (or, at least, the study of the Ukrainian language by journalists who write about Ukraine). On the political front, an important step would be to abandon the completion of Nord Stream 2 and support Ukraine in its aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Even if such a prospect is not likely in the near future and would require Ukraine to fulfill serious obligations, the very clear promise of principled openness by NATO and the EU could play an important role in Ukraine’s democratic transformation.

This being said, as paradoxical as it may sound, in our opinion, the responsibility for smoothing out negative stereotypes in Germany lies primarily with Ukraine. Nothing can promote a positive perception of Ukraine as effectively as the successful establishment of stable democratic institutions, a radical reduction in the level of corruption, and economic success. Also, a significant part of Ukrainian society still does not realize the scope

36 “They tried to put pressure on Zelensky before the elections: join the coalition, we will reform the government in the interests of Kolomoisky’ - ‘servant of the people’ Cherniev,” Censor.Net, 26.11.2020, https://censor.net/ru/resonance/3233436/na_zelenskogo_pered_vyborami_pytalis_nadavit_zahodite_v_koalitsiyu_budem_pereformirovyvat_pravitelstvo.

37 Claudia von Salzen, “Ukrainischer Botschafter weist Einladung von Michael Müller zurück [Ukrainian Ambassador Declines Michael Müller’s Invitation],” *Der Tagesspiegel*, 01.05.2020, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/gedenken-in-berlin-loest-eklat-aus-ukrainischer-botschafter-weist-einladung-von-michael-mueller-zurueck/25793888.html>; Olexander Scherba, “Mut und Anstand: Moskau glaubt in einer Welt ohne Regeln zu leben [Courage and Honesty: Moscow Believes It Lives in a World without Rules],” *Der Standard*, 10.07.2020, <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000118647239/mut-und-anstand>.

of the negative contribution of its “memory policy” to the perception of Ukraine in Germany, as it is enshrined in the 2015 law “On the Legal Status and Commemoration of Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century.” This law includes radical nationalist organizations that collaborated with the Nazis and took part in ethnic cleansing during World War II in the list of fighters for the independence of Ukraine. The law provides for criminal liability³⁸ towards those who “publicly display a disdainful attitude” towards the representatives of these organizations. Although no one has been prosecuted to date, the codification of such elements of the remembrance policy does nothing to lessen negative stereotypes. No RT Deutsch, Sputnik, or left or right marginals in Germany itself are capable of doing more damage to Ukraine’s image than torchlight processions in honor of the leader of a Ukrainian nationalist organization aimed at building a mono-ethnic state with a one-party dictatorship. The same applies to marches in honor of the SS Galicia division, or the tolerant attitude of Ukrainian society and government towards modern extreme right-wing organizations in Ukraine. Ukrainians should realize that in the eyes of Germans, such practices are very poorly combined with assurances of adherence to liberal values and “European choice.”

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the complexity of the problem, we decided to elaborate on only one aspect of the problem in this article, namely, how the legacy of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union affects the perception of Ukraine in Germany (and even within this framework, we had to exclude detailed consideration of tendencies to interpret the role of Ukrainians in World War II as collaborators, referring to media publications, feature films, or such a symptomatic event as the trial of former Nazi death camp warden Ivan Demianiuk).³⁹ A more detailed study should include an analysis of Russian-German contacts starting from the 18th century (when the German aristocracy became an important source for replenishing the Russian administrative and military elites),⁴⁰ the surge of interest in Russian culture in Germany at the end of

38 Kyrylo Tkachenko, “Laws of the truth: 2558, 2538,” *Politkrytyka*, 14.04.2015, <https://politykrytyka.org/2015/04/12/zakony-istyny-2558-2538/>.

39 Kyrylo Tkachenko, “Bolyova tochka: sprava Ivana Dem’yanyuka [Pressure Point: The case of Ivan Demianiuk],” *Krytyka*, July 2019, <https://krytyka.com/ua/articles/bolova-tochka-sprava-ivana-demyanyuka>.

40 Andreas Kappeler, *Russland als Vielvölkerreich* (München: Beck, 1992), 68-70, 108-120.

the 19th century, and, especially, interest in tsarist and then Bolshevik Russia as an “alternative” to Western democracies and a “natural ally” of Germany in the period between the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II (1888-1918) and the coming of the National Socialists to power. And it should be emphasized that such convictions could well coexist with fear of Russia and disdain for the Russians themselves. Such an attitude towards Russia was formulated by Bismarck, who believed that “with this spontaneous force that we are not in a position to destroy” an alliance should be concluded precisely to restrain Russia and use it in his interests.⁴¹ And even though Russia found itself in the opposite camp during the First World War, projects of a future German-Russian union among the German intelligentsia gained even more popularity precisely in the context of opposing the “special German path” to the then Western democracies (supposedly “spiritless”, inclined to “haggling” and “formalism”). To use Gerd Koenen’s expression, the complex set of motives “between fear and admiration” still makes Russia attractive to German society. In this context, it should also be noted that although the political transformations in West Germany are some of the most impressive examples of a transition from dictatorship to democracy, the fall of the Nazi dictatorship was not the work of the Germans themselves; rather it was primarily due to military intervention and occupation of West Germany by the armed forces of the United States, Great Britain, and France (millions of Germans, on the contrary, put up desperate armed resistance until the surrender in May 1945). That is, the interpretations popular among the German extreme right (and even some of the extreme left), according to which the modern form of government is imposed on Germany from the outside, are in fact not so far from the truth. Anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and—more broadly—anti-liberal resentment are still quite tangible, albeit not dominant, tendencies that have a very real impact on political life in modern Germany (and largely explain the electoral support of such parties as Die Linke and AfD). The view of Russia as a something of an ideal screen for projections of one’s authoritarian fantasies should be understood in the light of precisely this latent tendency in the political life of modern German society. Figuratively speaking, for many Germans, modern Russia gives the opportunity (not subject to external and internal censorship) to love something one cannot—openly—wish for one’s own country.

41 Gerd Koenen, *Der Russland-Komplex: Die Deutschen und der Osten, 1900-1945* (München: Beck, 2005), 9.



RUSSIAN MALIGN INFLUENCE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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The Czech Republic (population about 10.5 million) is not a large or influential country of the European Union (EU). Today, it is less influential than neighboring Poland, which entered the EU concurrently with the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic occupies a special place on the list of targets for Russian influence, including malign influence.

Unlike many other countries, such as Germany, which are the ultimate targets of Russian malign influence, the Czech Republic functions as a "hub" that Russian actors use to organize influence operations or subversive activities in other EU countries. At the same time, it cannot be claimed that the Czech Republic itself does not experience Russian malign influence. Thus, this small European country has a dual role. The first is as the target of Russian propaganda, "soft power," and direct subversive actions. The second is as a "hub," a base within the EU for exerting this influence on other countries and for legitimizing the key tenets of Russian foreign policy.

EUROPEAN UNION AND NATO

Currently the Czech Republic is not a formal ally of Russia, nor is it its strategic partner. This is evident in its membership in supranational associations and international organizations, a key parameter.

The Czech Republic has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 2003. It applied for EU membership back in 1996 and joined the Union together with the other Visegrád Four countries (Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). Despite a relatively high level of Euro-skepticism and the presence of parties seeking to hold a referendum to leave the EU, the majority of the Czech

population still opposes this idea. According to a survey conducted in April 2019 by the Czech agency Median, 63 percent of Czechs assess their country's accession to the European Union as "positive" or "rather positive."¹ According to a February 2019 poll by the Public Opinion Research Center at the Sociological Section of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic (CVVM), 55 percent of Czechs opposed the referendum on the country's exit from the European Union, 17 percent were undecided and only 28 percent were in favor.² Of these 28 percent, there may be a significant number who agree with Czech President Miloš Zeman: he supports holding the referendum, yet categorically declares that, if a referendum is called, he will vote for the preservation of the Czech Republic's membership in the European Union.

A still more important alignment is the Czech Republic's membership in NATO. According to a poll conducted by CVVM in February 2020, 58 percent of respondents in the Czech Republic say they are satisfied with membership in the North Atlantic Alliance and only 24 percent are "uneasy" about the fact that their country is a NATO member. Further, in 2020, according to Czech sociologists, for the first time the number of Czechs who believe that NATO membership is a guarantee of the security and independence of the Czech Republic exceeded the number who believe that this membership means submis-

1 Zdeňka Trachtová. "Exclusive poll: about 60% of Czechs perceive Czech accession to the EU positively after 15 years." iRozhlas, cz, 23.04.2019, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/evropska-unie-ceska-republika-pruzkum-median-vyroci-vstupu-do-eu_1904230605_nkr.
2 "The attitude of the Czech society towards Brexit." The Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM), 02.2019, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4854/f9/pm190301.pdf.

sion to the interests of other influential forces (48 percent against 44 percent. Finally, 69 percent of Czechs believe that NATO, as a military-political alliance, is currently necessary (25 percent—“definitely necessary,” and 44 percent—“rather necessary”).³

This support notwithstanding, current Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš took the liberty of criticizing NATO during the “migration crisis” in Europe.⁴ In 2019, he also advocated for reform of the Alliance.⁵

In addition, there are areas in which the Czech Republic separates itself from most EU countries—areas in which Russian agents of influence can also operate. In particular, the Czech Republic is not a member of the Euro area and, according to the CVVM poll conducted in May 2019, a quarter of Czechs would rather not see the introduction of a single European currency in their country, and 50 percent are categorically against it.⁶

RUSSIAN-CZECH RELATIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Czechoslovakia, and hence the territory of the modern Czech Republic, was under strong Soviet influence for most of the 20th century. In 1945, the Soviet Red Army liberated most of Czechoslovakia from Nazi occupation. It is true that the western part of the country was liberated by the Americans; however, following the Yalta Conference and with the consent of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile headed by President Edvard Beneš, the country moved completely into the zone of Soviet influence.

After the so-called “revolution” of 1948, power in the country was completely usurped by the local Communist Party, which was under the strict control of the

USSR. This was demonstrated by the repressions within the party itself from 1949 to 1953, in which Soviet special services were actively involved in the repression of more than 200,000 people, according to official data. And this happened even though there were no Soviet troops on Czechoslovakian territory at the time, having left after the liberation of the country.

The Soviet military returned as an occupation force in 1968 along with the armies of the Warsaw Pact countries. During the period of “normalization” after the occupation, 327,000 people were expelled from the Communist Party, and another 350,000 citizens of Czechoslovakia lost their jobs. The last soldiers of the Soviet occupation army were withdrawn from Czechoslovakia as late as 1991, two years after the so-called “Velvet Revolution,” when the dismantling of the communist, pro-Soviet political regime began.

According to CVVM sociologists, the events of 1968 are cited as the most tragic event of the 20th century for 57 percent of Czechs (another 19 percent call it a rather negative event), as opposed to the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany in 1938 (54 percent) and the Munich Agreement (50 percent).⁷ Thus, the qualified majority (76 percent) call the invasion by the Warsaw Pact countries the most tragic event, and it is this that still shapes the historical and political memory of the Czechs. It is, perhaps, the most reliable historical mental defense against Russian malign influence. This fact means that agents of Russian influence, and in particular ex-President Vaclav Klaus and his son Vaclav Klaus Jr., need to constantly remind Czechs of the non-equivalence of the USSR and Russia, to point out the fact that the modern Russian Federation is not, so they claim, the legal successor of the Soviet Union in terms of its crimes, including the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

This, however, is starkly contradicted by the actions of Russian authorities, who, for example, in December 2019, through statements by the Russian Foreign Ministry, condemned the decision of the Czech authorities to introduce a commemorative date in honor of those deceased during the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the troops

3 “Citizens on the membership of the Czech Republic in NATO.” The Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM), 02.2020, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a5165/f9/pm200312a.pdf.

4 Josef Kopecký, “Babiš called on the head of NATO to sink the smugglers’ ships. The latter pointed to the EU.” IDNES.cz, 9.9.2015, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/babis-vyzval-sefa-nato-k-potapeni-lodi-paseraku-ten-ale-ukazal-na-eu.A150909_152804_domaci_kop.

5 Ondřej Houska, “Babiš wants to change NATO because of Turkey. According to him, European states should sign an agreement on a new union within the framework of the alliance.” Hořpodarské noviny, 17.10.2019, <https://zahranicni.ihned.cz/c1-66661290-babis-chce-kvulturecku-zmenit-nato-evropske-staty-by-podle-nej-mely-v-ramci-aliance-podepsat-smlouvu-o-novem-spojencvi>.

6 “Citizens on the adoption of the euro and the results of the Czech Republic’s membership in the EU.” The Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM), 04.2019, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4932/f9/pm190531.pdf.

7 “Citizens on the specifics, periods and events of Czech-Slovak history from the emergence of the Czech Republic to the present” The Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM), 03.2018, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4607/f9/pd180509.pdf.

of the Warsaw Pact countries in 1968.⁸ The attempts of the Russian State Duma MPs to equate the veterans of the 1968 occupation campaign to the veterans of hostilities under Russian law, which have been going on since 2016, also serve to expose pro-Kremlin propaganda in the Czech Republic.⁹

On the other hand, traditional cultural ties between the Czech Republic and Russia play a significant role in strengthening Russian influence, primarily along the line of Pan-Slavism, which was especially popular on the territory of the modern Czech Republic in the 19th century, when the country was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In the current situation, these cultural ties are reflected in the Czech Eurosceptics' orientation towards Russia as a potential counterbalance to German and Anglo-Saxon influence. Politics is not just about marginal political actors or representatives of populist, anti-migrant parties and groups. It is also about the Communist Party of the Czech Republic and Moravia and the Freedom and Direct Democracy party of the national populist Tomio Okamura both having their factions in the lower house of the Czech parliament. In its program, the Freedom and Direct Democracy party consolidates the requirement to hold a referendum in the Czech Republic on the country's withdrawal from the EU.

This also applies to the country's two presidents: former Czech President Vaclav Klaus (the last President elected by parliament) and current President Miloš Zeman (the first President elected in general elections). This interest of Czech politicians in Russia is not accidental and is associated not only with history or geopolitics, but also with the overall current situation in the Czech Republic, which, by some parameters, has been approaching Russia rather than its Western European partners in the EU and NATO in recent years.

This is discernable, in particular, in the growth of corruption in the country. The Czech chapter of Transparency International was among the main personal opponents of the current head of the Czech government, An-

drej Babiš.¹⁰ The prime minister was personally involved in several corruption scandals related to the misuse of European subsidies—in particular subsidies for small businesses which Andrej Babiš received for his company, owned at the time by his children as a small business facility (the “Stork’s Nest” case).¹¹ In this case, European auditors confirmed that Andrej Babiš had a conflict of interest, and the Czech police opened and tried to investigate a criminal case on corruption.¹² The conflict of interest was also confirmed by an audit conducted by the staff of the European Commission (EC).¹³

In general, the 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index shows that the perception of corruption has been steadily growing in the Czech Republic in recent years. The country scores 56 points out of a possible 100 and is ranked 44th out of possible 180.¹⁴ This is one of the poorest results in the EU. Czech businesses believe that the country is also one of the most bureaucratic in the EU; Czech legislation is inconsistent; many more bureaucratic barriers exist, and more permits and licenses are required, than in Western Europe.

The Czech economy is not dependent on Russia. In the first nine months of 2019, mutual trade amounted to slightly more than USD 6 billion, while at the end of 2018 it exceeded USD 8 billion. Russia mainly supplies raw materials to the Czech Republic, and the Czech Republic remains an important source of technological equipment and technologies in general for Russian industry, insofar as the current sanctions allow.¹⁵

8 Commentary by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry in connection with the adoption in the Czech Republic of the law recognizing August 21 as the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Invasion and Subsequent Occupation (of Czechoslovakia) by the Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, 18.12.2019, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3961546.

9 “The deputies proposed to recognize the participants in the introduction of troops into Czechoslovakia as veterans of hostilities,” Meduza.io, 16.06.2016, <https://meduza.io/news/2016/06/06/deputaty-predlozhili-priznat-uchastnikov-vvoda-voysk-v-chehoslovakiyu-veteranami-boevyh-deystviy>

10 “Babiš insists that Transparency International is corrupt. The trial will continue in February.” Irozhlas.cz 7.1.2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/soud-babis-transparency-international-spor-kritika-zkorumpovana_2001071403_aur.

11 “There are 28 more examples similar to the Stork’s Nest, counted the Pirate Party,” iDnes.cz, 10.12.2020, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/jakub-michalek-pirati-agrofert-dotace-andrej-babis.A201210_101025_domaci_lesa.

12 “Details of the Stork’s Nest case. How Prime Minister Babiš came to the attention of the police,” Seznam Zprávy, 4.12.2019, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/den-rozhodnuti-o-capim-hnizde-jak-se-premier-dostal-do-hledacku-policie-78132>.

13 “Babis has a conflict of interest, confirmed the latest version of the audit by the European Commission,” iDnes.cz, 30.10.2020, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/babis-stret-zajmu-evropska-komise-capi-hnizdo-audit-verze.A201130_171416_domaci_kzem

14 Corruption Perceptions Index 2019, Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2019>.

15 “Foreign trade of Russia with the Czech Republic for 9 months of 2019”, Russian-trade.com, <https://russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2019-11/vneshnyaya-torgovlya-rossii-s-chehiey-za-9-mesyatsev-2019-g/>.

ELECTIONS AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

One should note the relatively successful performance of pro-Russian politicians and parties in the Czech elections. They are relatively successful because, in the total number of parties registered in the last parliamentary elections, non-systemic parties that include in their program the exit from the EU or NATO, a strict anti-immigrant agenda, and the ideas of abolishing parliamentary democracy in the Czech Republic accounted for about half of the electoral list—more than 40 out of about 90 parties admitted to participate in elections. At the same time, none of these radical organizations except for the Communist Party and Okamura's party entered parliament.

The last election campaign, which took place in the Czech Republic in 2017-2018, was protracted. It was a double campaign, first for parliamentary elections, and consequently for the president. As of 2013, the Czech president is not elected by parliament, which is the expected process for a parliamentary republic, but by direct universal suffrage. This has seriously upset the constitutional balance in the country.

In 2013, the election was won by Miloš Zeman, a former Czech prime minister who led the country during the period of preparations for joining the EU and NATO. However, he was marginalized within the ruling class, which led to his significant geopolitical reorientation towards Russia and China. His adviser Martin Nejedlý (former co-founder of the Czech limited liability company Lukoil Aviation Czech, s.r.o. co-owned by LUKOIL Aviation BV, the Dutch subsidiary of a Russian company)¹⁶ played an essential role in the organization and financing of his campaigns both in 2013 and 2018.

During the 2018 elections, Martin Nejedlý was also a member of the "Friends of Miloš Zeman" club, which, in financing his election campaign, bypassed the current legislation, since the president himself had said that he would not campaign. Some of the sponsors later could not be found,¹⁷ and some turned out to have Russian

roots and foreign origins,¹⁸ for example, the Slovenian businessman Alexei Belyaev, who recognizes the facts of friendship and business relations with the Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, and friendship with the former head of Russian Railways, Vladimir Yakunin, as well as long-term cooperation with Russian Railways.¹⁹ A scheme for financing the election campaign while bypassing state control over the spending of the electoral fund (in fact, without the formation of this fund) was proposed by political consultants, possibly including Russian ones, based on the results of an analysis of the Czech electoral legislation on the controversial issues and legal gaps.

Russian political strategists associated with the Czech Republic may indeed have acted as consultants. For instance, Igor Mintusov, who became a citizen of the Czech Republic after the victory of Miloš Zeman in the first popular presidential elections and on the eve of his re-election. Or Timofey Shevyakov, who in 2020 acted as one of the leaders of the Direct Democracy Party in Russia, a party funded by the creators of the popular game World of Tanks,²⁰ who themselves are also indirectly associated with the "Russian" political party in Cyprus.²¹ Shevyakov, in addition to having Russian citizenship, may also be a resident of San Marino.²²

The party with almost the same Russian name of "Freedom and Direct Democracy" is the most popular national-populist party in the Czech Republic. Its leader, Tomio Okamura, is a Czech citizen of Japanese-Czech origin. In the 2017 parliamentary elections, its electoral strategy, Okamura's door-to-door campaign—that is, direct communication with voters in the provinces and through social networks—was the precursor to the electoral campaign of Miloš Zeman. Miloš Zeman actively and publicly supported this party and attended its congress. The ideologies of the Okamura party and later, in 2018, of Miloš Zeman in the presidential elections signifi-

18 Andrea Procházková, "How Friends of Milos Zeman Hold Tens of Millions Non-Campaigns," *Respekt*, 10.1.2018, <https://www.respekt.cz/politika/jak-delaji-pratele-milose-zemana-nekampan>.

19 Jiří Sezemski, "Alexei Belyaev: Friend of Putin and Fico, Russian Ties in Central Europe," *Týždeň*, 22.7.2017, <https://www.tyzden.sk/spolocnost/41176/alexej-beljajev-andrej-uv-pritel-z-petrimexu-ruska-spojka-ve-stredni-evrope/>.

20 Viktoria Polyakova, "Vladislav Skobelev, World of Tanks Developer announced the verification of "golden" passports by Cyprus", *RBC*, 17.11.2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/business/17/11/2020/5fb4137c9a7947ae467601a4>.

21 Elena Gabrielyan, Pierre Setroy, "Leader of the Russian Party of Cyprus: "I decided to be European," *Radio France International*, 4.10.2018, <https://www.rfi.fr/ru/rossiya/20181002-lider-russkoi-partii-kipra-ya-reshil-byt-evropeitse>.

22 Angelina Galanina, "Itank-party", *"Kommersant" No. 2* dated 10.01.2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4215517>.

16 Vojtěch Srnka, "Lukoil paid the million fine for Nejedlý, the latter didn't give a single crown," *iDnes.cz*, 4.10.2016, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/prazsky-hrad-lukoil-martin-nejedly.A161103_202521_domaci_fer.

17 Kristýna Guryčová, "Search for donors from the society of "Friends of Miloš Zeman": telephones are not available, contact with Janoušek, neighbors do not know them," *iRozhlas.cz*, 30.1.2018, https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/milos-zeman-spolek-pratele-milose-zemana-prezidentske-volby-2018-sponzorovani_1801300600_hm.

cantly overlapped.

After the end of the second round of the presidential elections in the Czech Republic, Tomio Okamura's party transferred all the money from the party's account (thereby violating the law, which resulted in this payment becoming public) for the provision of consulting services.²³ These firms turned out to be associated with a system of sites that, according to Czech analysts, are associated with the so-called Aeronet swarm—a group of disinformation propaganda media promoting, among other things, Russian interests in the Czech Republic.²⁴

THE SYSTEM OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

At the end of 2020, Martin Nejedlý traveled to Moscow where he met with President Putin's foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov, whose is considered to have a higher leadership status than Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. According to the official version, which Nejedlý voiced to the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Tomáš Petříček, who is also the only staunch supporter of European integration in the current Czech government, the conversation with Ushakov was about a meeting between the two presidents which was supposed take place in 2020. However, just at this time, the completion of the Dukovany nuclear power plant was being discussed in the Czech Republic, and the Czech liberal opposition opposed the admission of the Chinese or the Russian *Rosatom* to the competition.

Nejedlý is one of the Kremlin's most obvious counterparts in the Czech Republic. However, Russian influence in recent years has also spread through less obvious channels than the Miloš Zeman administration—for example, golf clubs and mixed martial arts associations that have begun to work actively in the Czech Republic and are infiltrated by Chechen businesses associated with Ramzan Kadyrov and his inner circle.

In general, it can be stated that all available tools of influence are being used, constituting interference in the

internal politics of the Czech Republic by helping individual political players, encouraging them into alliances, and interfering in elections.

Energy policy is being used most actively (in the area of natural gas trade and nuclear energy). On Czech territory, as previously conducted investigations show, offshore companies registered by Russian businessmen, including some who are under sanctions, are opening their branches in the Czech Republic. This was revealed, for example, in the case of Yevgeny Prigozhin's planes.²⁵

There is no single hierarchical system; this activity is carried out according to the "swarm" principle whereby the Kremlin sets only the general direction of activity for various groups of influence and Russian organizations. For example, the Kremlin uses Russian-speaking immigrants from the former USSR to the Czech Republic, who form a single Russian-speaking diaspora, as lobbyists for its interests. In addition, the appearance of alleged Czech products in the Russian-linked Belarusian regime of Alexander Lukashenko indirectly confirms rumors about possible criminal cooperation in the illegal-arms trade.

There are no Russian think tanks in the Czech Republic, but the curator of Russian foreign policy propaganda, and the first deputy head of the presidential administration, Alexei Gromov, also acts as an informal curator of the Czech direction. Gromov worked for a long time in Russian diplomatic missions in the Czech Republic, and then in neighboring Slovakia.²⁶

In addition, paramilitary formations associated with Russia operate on Czech Republic territory. In particular, these are clubs of self-defense, mixed martial arts, and ultimate fighters, led by Russian instructors. But there are also paramilitary organizations that are directly connected not only with the Russian authorities but also with the administrations of the territories occupied by Russian troops and pro-Russian militants in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine.

First, we are talking about the organization "National House Defense" (Národní Domobrana), which in 2016 had about 90 branches in the Czech Republic. Its members are Czechs who possess firearms on a le-

23 Robert Břešťan, "Where Did The 7.4 Million from SPD Account Go? According to Úsvit, the money was spent for analysis and media marketing," 31.1.2018, <https://hlidacipes.org/kam-odeslo-74-milionu-uctu-spd-podle-vzoru-uvit-analyzy-medialni-marketing/>.

24 Jan Cemper, "Review of disinformation sites, projects and people spreading disinformation about the current pandemic—Monitoring," Manipulatori.cz, 16.10.2020, <https://manipulatori.cz/prehled-dezinformacnich-webu-projektu-a-lidi-siricich-dezinformace-o-aktualni-pandemii/>.

25 Alesya Marokhovskaya, Irina Dolinina, Denis Korotkov, "Fly with Concorde planes," Novaya Gazeta No. 111, 4.10.2019, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/10/03/82216-letayte-samoletami-konkorda>.

26 Mikhail Rubin, Maria Zholobova, Roman Badanin, "The Puppet Master. Portrait of Alexei Gromov, Head of Russian State Propaganda," Proekt.media, 23.1.2019, <https://www.proekt.media/portrait/alexey-gromov/>.

gal basis.²⁷ Many members of this organization went to training in the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, and one of the members of the Council of this organization, Nela Liskova, organized a "people's consulate of the DPR" in the Czech Republic. The authorities were forced to close it through the courts and with the help of police intervention.²⁸

"National House Defense" also opposes Czech membership in NATO and the European Union and defends the need to preserve the memory of communist-era Czechoslovak military traditions. The activities of the National House Defense, which includes many former members of the radical right-wing National Democratic Party, allow the Czech extreme right to align with the Czech communists,²⁹ who constitute another flank promoting Russian interests within the Czech party and parliamentary system.

It was the leader of the Czech communists, Vojtěch Filip, who introduced the incumbent President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman to Vladimir Yakunin and invited Zeman to go to the Dialogue of Civilizations Forum in Rhodes for the first time. This forum was organized and sponsored by Vladimir Yakunin, the former head of Russian Railways and a former KGB employee.³⁰ Regarding the field of security, former employee of the communist "people's militia" Zdeněk Ondráček is an influential member of the parliamentary faction of the Communist Party. He is a member of all key committees and subcommittees on security, police oversight, etc. He was even appointed head of the commission of the lower house of the Czech parliament to control the activities of the Czech security agencies, but under the pressure of mass protests, he was forced to leave this post.³¹

As for intelligence activities and cybercrime, they are

carried out by Russian special services more from Czech territory than on its territory. Thus, accusations against the Russian special services of possible cyber-attacks on the Czech authorities have been heard more than once, but Czech intelligence has not publicly confirmed them. Indeed, the Czech special services stated that they had managed to suppress Russian intelligence activities in the Czech Republic, which were being carried out under the guise of commercial IT firms,³² but these activities were oriented outside the Czech Republic.

Historical revisionism from 2018 to 2020 was another lever of Russian pressure on Czech politics. The revisionism centered around the occupation of 1968 and everything connected with it and was directly connected to the controversy surrounding the transfer and then the demolition of the monument to Soviet Marshal Konev in Prague, as well as the installation of a monument to the soldiers of the Russian Liberation Army (the so-called "Vlasovites") in the Prague Řeporyje district who supported the Prague anti-Nazi uprising in the last days of the war.³³

RELIGION

The Czech Republic is the least religious country in the EU; in 2018, only 25 percent of Czechs identified as "religious" while 31 percent firmly claimed that they were atheists.³⁴ Therefore, Russian influence, which, despite everything, is present in this area, remains not very significant in general on the scale of the Czech Republic. In recent years, as migration from the post-Soviet space, primarily from Ukraine, has grown, so has the number of parishioners of the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, the autocephaly of which was recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in 1951, and by the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1998. According to the data for 2011, official statistics found only 20,500 parishioners of this church (for comparison, the Roman Catholic Church has 1,082,000, and Jehovah's

27 "Lookout wall, three veterans, and a fat pig. The Czech domobrana is armed", Lidovky.cz, 9.7.2016, https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/ceska-domobrana-se-ozbrojuje.A160709_081240_In_domov_ELE.

28 Martin Fendrych, "Czech Home Guard: Against the Government, Against NATO, Against the EU, Against Muslims. Putin's Fifth Column," Aktualne.cz, 13.7.2016, <https://nazory.aktualne.cz/komentare/ceska-domobrana-proti-vlade-proti-nato-proti-eu-proti-muslim/r-96019578481611e682380025900fea04/>.

29 Šárka Kábátová, "Abbreviations will not protect us, will we create a home guard?—asks the deputy from KSČM", Lidovky.cz, 2.5.2016, https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/bukvice-nas-neochrani-zalozime-domobrany-napsal-poslanec-za-kscm-strana-to-neresi.A160501_162132_In_domov_sk.

30 Katerina Aizpurvit, Wagon Prague—Rhodes, Radio Prague International, 30 September 2016, <https://ruski.radio.cz/vagon-praga-rodos-8212778>.

31 Josef Kopecký, "Communist Ondráček resigned from the Commission for the Control of Law Enforcement Bodies (GIBS)," iDnes.cz, 6.3.2018, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/spor-o-ondracka-snemovna-gibs-komunista-ods-ano.A180306_111232_domaci_kop.

32 Lucia Hrdlichkova, Martin Zita, "Russian spies in the Czech Republic operated under the guise of IT firms. Some of them had Czech citizenship," Seznam Zprávy, 19 March 2019, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/rusti-spioni-v-cesku-operovali-pod-krytim-it-firem-nekteri-meliceske-obcanstvi-68621>.

33 Kristina Zakurdaeva, "Prague, Marshal Konev and the "Russian agent": how the "ricin business" developed in the Czech Republic," Currently, 12.5.2020, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/kak-razvalos-ricinovoye-delo-v-chehii/30607076.html>.

34 "Czechs' Attitude to Faith", Charter of Empirical Research—STEM, 18.12.2018, <https://www.stem.cz/postoj-cechu-k-nabozenstvi/>.

Witnesses, about 13,000) in the Czech Republic,³⁵ however, it is generally believed that the real picture differs considerably due to labor migrants, including those permanently residing in the Czech Republic. The hierarchs themselves estimated the number of parishioners at more than 100,000. There are also parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Czech Republic, and its influence on the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia is such that after its last leadership election it is still in a state of half-split caused by Moscow's attempts to forcefully push through the election of a loyal ROC primate.

As for the most numerous religion in the Czech Republic, the Roman Catholic Church, its leadership in recent years has shown a close connection with Czech President Miloš Zeman and his entourage on most issues. This is especially true of the head of the Czech Roman Catholic Church, Cardinal Dominik Duka, known for his conservative, EU-skeptical statements. While there is no direct Russian influence in this instance, in general, including through the contacts of Cardinal Duka with Zeman, as well as with the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church in the Czech lands and Slovakia, Russian influence is present, although it does not have a significant effect on the situation in the predominantly atheistic Czech Republic.

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

The Czech Republic has a strong and stable municipal government that actively interacts with the state government and often opposes it. The independence of the municipal government is based on several parameters. First, it is a fairly deep implementation of the European Charter on Local Self-Government, which ensures the real independence of municipal authorities from the state, including—of fundamental importance—financial independence.

Of course, this does not mean that Czech municipalities are completely financially independent. Most of them are financially dependent on external support. This can be funding from the region, the largest unit of formal territorial division of the Czech Republic, funding from the government of the Czech Republic, or support from the EU. The second and third types of financial assistance can theoretically cause a conflict of interest and make municipalities dependent on the ruling party and/or co-

alition since European subventions are also distributed through government agencies. But financial support from the regions is most often not associated with the central government and does not depend on it.

This is due to the specifics of the organization of the party system and the system of representation in the Czech Republic. Firstly, the deputies of the municipal councils may have other mandates, most often the mandates of the deputies of the regional parliaments. Since the "basic" for further re-election is most often communal, that is, the municipal mandate, such deputies become active lobbyists for the interests of their municipalities at the regional level. The second reason is the electoral system in the Czech Republic, which always allows participation in municipal elections not only for lists of nationally registered political parties but also for associations of citizens, which turns municipalities into sources of alternative legitimization of power, i.e., not based on membership in major nationwide parties.

Nonetheless, it is the partisanship of the heads of the executive power of municipalities that prevents the establishment of control of the central state power over the municipalities. Mayors of municipalities are not directly elected and may be recalled or lose office in the event of the collapse of the ruling coalition in the commune (community). This often interferes with the corruption of mayors, among other reasons because it does not allow the central government to expeditiously resolve issues of joint jurisdiction with them directly, bypassing public discussion in the municipal council. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, after the victory of his "Yes" (ANO) party in the 2017 parliamentary elections, immediately tried to raise two issues: (1) the dissolution of the upper house of the Czech parliament, that is, the Senate, which has a control function; and (2) the introduction of direct elections of heads of the executive branch of municipalities modeled on presidential elections. The upper house of parliament was particularly active in supporting the investigation of conflicts of interest for the prime minister. The majority in the party belong to his political opponents, and among the mayors of large cities, the majority also represent opposition parties.

If implemented, these ideas would be an even stronger blow to the Czech constitutional system than direct presidential elections and would lead to an even more severe imbalance, and hence to a decrease in the quality of democracy.

The stability of the party system is a main factor in the high stability of parliamentary democracy in the Czech Republic, in comparison with its closest neighbors such

35 "Religion of the citizens according to the results of the 2011 population census," Czech Statistical Office, 27.2.2014, <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/nabozenska-vira-obyvatele-podle-vysledku-scitani-lidu-2011-61wegp46fl>.

as Slovakia or Poland. The Czech Republic's system is in the fullest sense a parliamentary democracy with political parties rather than individual politicians playing a significant role. Even the authoritarian changes of recent years, which began with the introduction of popular presidential elections, won by the authoritarian politician Miloš Zeman in 2013, have not yet been able to break this system. The parliamentary party system is also withstanding pressure from the new government, which began after the minority government came to power with the help of Zeman, led by Andrej Babiš, a Slovak-born billionaire and former informant of the Czech Secret Service STB (communist period). In the Czech Republic, not only are parties created after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 still operating and relatively influential, but the same goes for parties that formally retained the right to operate under the communist regime and before it, such as the Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats.

MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The independent media in the Czech Republic are in crisis. Public television and radio are under pressure from the authorities, to which they are in soft opposition. In the early 2010s, German owners, who owned all the largest print media and publishing houses, began to get rid of Czech assets, which were acquired by Czech big business. Currently, the PPF Foundation of the richest man in the Czech Republic, Petr Kellner, who earned his first millions from Russian privatization and keeps his business in Russia, owns the Prima TV channel group. The largest private media holding is owned by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. Despite several attempts, the opposition failed to pass a law that would prohibit such a concentration of media in the hands of a single person, especially that of a politician. Such a law was passed in Italy, where the left and centrists managed to reduce the influence of the politician and media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, who served several terms as prime minister. Still, Andrej Babiš, unlike Petr Kellner, at least according to official data does not have a business in Russia or significant business ties with Russia. Andrej Babiš's media holdings include the Nova family of television channels and the Marfa publishing house, which publishes the popular sociopolitical newspapers "Lidove noviny" and "MF Dnes."

Barrandov, another media holding, formally belongs to its CEO and "star" of the Barrandov TV channel Jaromir Soukup. In the past, he also owned one of the largest Czech media advertisers, Medea; the Chinese financial group CITIC became his partner and then the

majority owner of the company.³⁶ For a long time, Soukup hosted a regular TV show on the Barrandov TV channel in the format of an interview with the President of the Czech Republic. This show was regularly criticized, much like other Barrandov media products, by the Council on Radio and Television Broadcasting, among others, for complimenting the president and his entourage.³⁷ Jaromir Soukup is also married to the cousin of the president's advisor, Martin Nejedlý.³⁸

Another Czech billionaire, Zdeněk Bakala, owns a less powerful but still relatively influential media holding, whose key publication is the newspaper "Hospodarske noviny." He is also a sponsor of the liberal party TOP-09 and is in opposition to the current government.

The very popular Czech tabloid "Blesk" and with it the large publishing house Czech News Center were acquired from the German Axel Springer by Daniel Křetínský, a former junior partner in the business of Petr Kellner (owns 50 percent of the shares) and Patrik Tkáč (40 percent of the shares).³⁹

The key media control body is the Radio and Television Broadcasting Council of the Czech Republic. During the tenure of Andrej Babiš, and with the help of a situational majority, it is gradually replacing, as the term of office expires, the members of this council, elected earlier, with people who have an openly negative attitude towards the liberal media. This is happening in alliance with the Czech Communist Party, which is represented in the national parliament, and with the Okamura Party.

It is also worth mentioning the poor situation with regard to the protection of human rights in the Czech Republic. The human rights infrastructure is seriously weakened. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš is in direct conflict with the Czech chapter of Transparency International. Key state and public institutions in the field of human rights protection have been handed over to the opponents of the very idea of protecting rights other than social ones.

36 "The Chinese got the majority in the Medea agency, Nejedlý acted as an intermediary in the sale," Aktualne.cz 18.4.2020, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/ekonomika/cinane-ovladli-vetsinu-v-soukupove-agenture-medea-prodej-zpr/r-701ce31e814a11ea95caac1f6b220ee8/>.

37 "Tip: Soukup favored Zeman in pre-election debates, possibly violated the law," iDnes.cz, 8.2.2018, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/tv-barrandov-jaromir-soukup-volby-milos-zeman.A180208_173259_domaci_amu.

38 Jiří Pšenička, Tomáš Pergler, "The End of Zeman on Barrandov can be a severe wound for Soukup," Seznam Zprávy, 13.1.2020, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/konec-zemana-na-barrandove-muze-byt-pro-soukupa-tvrda-rana-86256>.

39 Rene Volfík, "Křetínský and Tkáč bought Ringier," Czech Television, 20.12.2013, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/ekonomika/1057656-kretinsky-a-tkac-koupili-ringier>.

In particular, the new Commissioner for Human Rights in the Czech Republic, Stanislav Křeček, is focused on protecting only the labor rights of citizens. The new Commissioner for the Protection of Rights under the Czech government, Helena Válková, joined the Czech Communist Party after the occupation of 1968, during the period of so-called "normalization" and actively collaborated with the communist regime.⁴⁰

EFFICACY EVALUATION

Thus, the activities of the Kremlin in the Czech Republic can be considered relatively successful both tactically and strategically. The membership of this country in NATO and the EU has been called into question in recent years, although it continues to be implemented. The growth of supporters of the approach to NATO as a guarantor of security is compensated by the presence of an active minority, which, for the first time since the country's accession to NATO, managed to question the necessity of the Czech Republic's membership in this military-political bloc.

Part of the Czech political establishment is in favor of a partnership with the Kremlin. For many, this is not so much a strategic direction as a compensation for the sharp increase in Germany's influence on the Czech Republic, both after 1989 and especially after joining the EU. For some of the Czech ruling elites, diplomatic flirting with Russia is a way to protect Czech interests within the EU.

The Kremlin has established long-term cooperation with individual institutions of power (most notably the institution of the president). This does not mean that through cooperation with Miloš Zeman, Moscow receives a universal instrument for influencing Czech politics. First, in a parliamentary republic, even a popularly elected president with a very high level of legitimacy, such as Miloš Zeman, has very limited powers. Secondly, Zeman is not a Russian puppet but remains an independent politician.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin is getting the support it needs from the Czech president to legalize its foreign policy in the EU. First, note Zeman's repeated statements on recognizing Russian sovereignty over Crimea, annexed in 2014. In addition, Zeman provides support to Russia on many specific issues of domestic Czech politics

40 Anna Kottová, "Valkova is accused of bullying dissidents: someone wants to cause me political harm, I am considering a lawsuit," iRozhlas.cz 9.1.2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/helena-valkova-ksc-komunismus-josef-urvalek-ministryne-spravedlnosti-lidska_2001091538_akoo.

and administrative decisions. In particular, Zeman and his entourage in 2018-2019 put pressure on the Czech justice authorities when the issue of extradition to the United States of the hacker Yevgeny Nikulin, detained on Czech territory, was being decided.

Zeman is also in a long-term confrontation with the Czech counterintelligence BIS, questioning its reports regarding the activities of Chinese and Russian special services and agents on Czech territory. At the end of November 2020, it became known that the President of the Czech Republic directly requested BIS management inform him in detail about the Russian agents operating in the Czech Republic (spies, networks of influence), and therefore to disclose data on activities of the Czech special services against them.⁴¹ According to the opposition, he had no legal right to do so. Naturally, the opposition suggested that this information could eventually get to people close to Miloš Zeman who did not pass the security checks of the Czech special services, including Martin Nejedlý or the presidential chancellor Vratislav Mynář.⁴² This was not the first time that Zeman and his entourage had been accused of lobbying Russian interests and posing a threat to state security. Czech politicians made the same comments when the presidential office and Miloš Zeman himself tried to extradite Russian hacker Yevgeny Nikulin to Russia.⁴³ At that time, persons associated with the Russian diplomatic mission in the Czech Republic acted in the interests of Nikulin.⁴⁴ The decision of the Minister of Justice Robert Pelikán to extradite Nikulin to the United States was followed by the resignation of the minister.⁴⁵

In addition, the comparative success of Russian pol-

41 Markéta Chaloupská, "President Zeman asks the head of the Secret Service about the names of Russian spies and details of the actual operations. "It is a trap" experts warn," iRozhlas.cz, 30.11.2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/prezident-zeman-rusko-spioni-bis-koudelka_2011300600_ace.

42 Dominika Jeřábková, "Zeman is lobbying Russia's interests in BIS again, the opposition is outraged," Novinky.cz, 30.11.2020, <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/zeman-ukolem-pro-bis-opet-lobbuje-za-ruske-zajmy-bouri-se-opozice-40343715>.

43 Lukáš Prchal, Ondřej Kundra, "Zeman and the Chancellor lobbied the extradition of the hacker to Russia. Mynář: This is none of your business!", Aktualne.cz, 23.2.2018, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/hrad-name-tlaci-kvuli-hackerovi-rekl-pelikan-babisovi-za-vy/~12479304188f11e894960cc47ab5f122/>.

44 Janek Kroupa, "The Mystery Game for Nikulin: Money from Russia Should Have Organized Pelikan's Lobbying," iRozhlas.cz, 5.5.2018, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/jevgenij-nikulin-robert-pelikan-stanislav-mecl-vydani-hacker-usa-rusko-spionazni_1804051518_haf.

45 Marek Pokorný, "Pelikan Leaves Politics Also Because He Did Not Want to Give in to Zeman," Právní rádce, 10.4.2018, <https://pravnicaradce.ihned.cz/c1-66105080-pelikan-v-politice-skoncil-i-pto-ze-nechtel-davat-zaminky-zemanovi-na-jednani-jezdival-na-kole-do-zahranici-letal-vlastnim-letadlem>.

icy towards the Czech Republic lies in the fact that the Czech Republic remains Russia's technological window to the EU. This shows the mutual trade turnover.

At the same time, in recent years, the Czech Republic has become more and more open to unofficial external influence, not only Russian but also, for example, Chinese. This is a consequence, not a cause, of the growing level of corruption in the country, the weakening of human rights protection, and the violation of the constitutional system due to the imbalance between the president and parliament.

The system of municipal government remains the most stable and independent of Russian influence. But it can be predicted that if the coalition headed by Prime Minister and leader of the "Yes" party Andrej Babiš remains in power, the central authorities of the Czech Republic will resume their attack on the independence of municipalities, by seeking to limit their budget revenues and change the system of electing heads of executive power of municipalities.

The relatively successful counteraction of the Czech special services to Russian agent influence may also be seriously affected if BIS nevertheless transfers all available information about the activities of the Russian special services in the Czech Republic to Zeman.

The level of Russia's influence in the Czech Republic in the medium term depends to a significant degree on the outcome of the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2021. In the case of a coalition of the Pirate Party and the political movement "Mayors and Independents," about which negotiations began in November 2020, the "Mayors," who express exactly the interests of Czech local self-government, together with the most popular opposition Pirate Party, will most likely prevent further erosion of the Czech constitutional system, prevent the dissolution of the Senate and direct elections of heads of municipalities, and also stop the transformation of the system of state control over public media. It is difficult to predict whether even noticeable internal political changes will lead to rapid positive changes in protecting the national interests of the Czech Republic. However, the above complex of factors could contribute, at least, to the inhibition of the current negative processes. With the weakening of Czech statehood, the imbalance of the constitutional system would be checked, which would automatically weaken external influences on the Czech Republic, to include the Russian influence.



THE KREMLIN'S IN- FLUENCE IN SLOVAKIA: ROOTS AND ACTORS

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2020, the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it had demanded three members of diplomatic staff of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bratislava to leave Slovakia for activities incompatible with their diplomatic status. The decision came after the Slovak foreign service completed an internal investigation in connection with information that Slovakia's consulate general in St. Petersburg issued the Schengen entry visa to a Russian citizen who used it to visit Germany, where, as German police discovered, he assisted in the assassination of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen origin, in Berlin in August 2019. The killer caught by German police was Vadim Krasikov, who had a passport of the Russian Federation in the name of Vadim Sokolov. The assassination of Khangoshvili was an operation of the Russian GRU.

The Slovak general consulate in St. Petersburg issued an entry visa to "Roman Davydov," a person with a false identity (his real name was Roman Demyanchenko, according to Bellingcat's investigation¹). In its statement, the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed directly to the connection between the decision to expel Russian diplomats and the assassination in Berlin: "In addition, the visa issued at the Slovak Consulate General in St. Petersburg was misused and in this connection a serious crime was committed on the territory of another NATO

and EU member state."² The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by expelling three Slovak diplomats and made a harsh statement saying that it considered Slovakia's decision "an unfriendly step contradicting the traditional spirit of constructive development of relations between our countries."³

The expulsion of Russian diplomats resonated loudly in Slovakia not only in the media, in the foreign policy and security expert community, but also on the political scene, mainly because it became an indicator of the change that had occurred in the government elite in its relations with Russia. After the parliamentary elections in February 2020, which brought spectacular victory to the center-right parties and a heavy defeat to party Smer-SD (Direction – Social Democracy) of Robert Fico and to its allies from the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), Russian pro-government media claimed that Russia was losing a friendly country in Central Europe. Some even labeled the new Prime Minister Igor Matovič an "Ukrainophile";⁴ surprisingly for anyone who closely follows Slovak domestic political developments and is

2 Mirek Tóda, "Slovensko vyhostilo troch ruských diplomatov, je to odvetu za zneužitie našich víz pri vražde v Berlíne," [Slovakia has expelled three Russian diplomats in retaliation for the misuse of our visas in the Berlin murder], *Denník N*, August 10, 2020, <https://dennikn.sk/1999069/slovensko-vyhostilo-troch-ruskych-diplomatov-je-to-odvetu-za-zneuizie-nasich-viz-pri-vrazde-v-berline/?ref=in>.

3 "О вызове в МИД России Посла Словакии в Москве," [On Summoning the Ambassador of Slovakia in Moscow to the Russian Foreign Ministry], "August 31, 2020. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (website), https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4306297.

4 Grigorij Mesežnikov, "A Friend Lost? The Slovak Elections Seen by the Russian Pro-Government Media," *Visegrad Insight*, March 31, 2020, <https://visegradinsight.eu/a-friend-lost-slovakia-elections-russia/>.

1 "Bellingcat: установлена личность соучастника убийства Хангошвили," [Bellingcat: an accomplice in Khangoshvili's murder has been identified], Radio Liberty (website), August 29, 2020, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30810671.html>.

aware about Igor Matovič's political profile—there were no signs of "Ukrainophilia" in his previous activities.

The fact, however, is that the new Slovak government emphasized, in its program manifesto and in the statements of its individual representatives, the objective to strengthen the country's pro-Western foreign policy, external security, and defense orientation. Formally, it did not contrast very much with the stance of the previous government led by Robert Fico (2016–2018) and Peter Pellegrini (2018–2020), which also officially subscribed to the pro-Western course. But such declarations often conflicted with the implementation of foreign policy. Both Fico and Pellegrini called for lifting the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia for its aggression in Ukraine. Parliamentary Speaker Andrej Danko (SNS), who often visited Russia and met with the Russian politicians placed on the EU's sanctions list, behaved as a de facto supporter of the pro-Russian line in Slovakia's foreign policy. The government formed by Smer-SD was not able to push through a new version of the state's defense and security strategy in parliament during the entire 2016–2020 cycle due to strong resistance from pro-Russian SNS. In 2018 Slovakia did not join NATO and EU allies and did not expel a single Russian diplomat in response to Russia's GRU attempt to kill Russian defector Sergey Skripal in the United Kingdom.

The question arises: Are there reasons to believe that Slovakia is in a specific position in its relations with Russia compared to its neighbors from the Visegrad countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) and other EU and NATO member states?

The general answer can be "No." Slovakia is a part of the collective West, it is country whose population made this strategic choice and the country's dominant political elite complies with such a decision. However, there are enclaves of pro-Russian attitudes and sentiments in some sectors of Slovak society (including politics), inherited from the past and based on sociocultural orientations of certain parts of the population or formed as a result of external influence. The current political regime in Moscow, therefore, is trying to use this situation to strengthen pro-Russian sentiments, seeking allies on the political scene, in media, academic, and cultural circles. The ultimate goal of Russia's efforts in this direction is, however, purely political—and it is to disconnect Slovakia from the West.

Let's try to take a closer look at the societal factors that encourage the current Russian regime to assert its influence in Slovakia, to the main lines of Russia's activities in this country, to the nature of Slovak-Russian bilateral

relations, and to domestic Slovak actors influenced by Russia.

HISTORIC ROOTS OF RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE

Several events in the 20th century that significantly affected the fate of Slovakia and the life of its citizens were linked with Russia (or the Soviet Union as the historic continuation of pre-Communist Russia): the First World War (1914–1918), the Communist Revolution (1917), the Second World War (1939–1945), the Slovak National Uprising (1944), the Communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia (1948), the invasion of armies of the USSR and Warsaw Treaty states to Czechoslovakia (1968), and the subsequent Soviet occupation (1968–1991). As a result, the relatively high-level presence of "Russian factor" that exists in Slovakia's political and cultural discourse creates a platform for Russia to employ its tools of influence.

As a country with a prevailing Slavic population, national political and intellectual circles emphasized, in the past, the necessity to build special relations with Russia on the basis of close linguistic and cultural ties between Slovaks and Russians. These circles were drawing an image of Russia as a genuine defender of small Slavic nations in Central East and South East Europe. Historic personalities who represented this opinion in the 19th century are considered part of a national cultural pantheon with unambiguously positive connotations. Their literary heritage is a subject of study as a part of school curricula. Thus, after three decades since the collapse of the Communist regime in Slovakia, the education system continues to contribute to the survival of Russophilia based on utopian or even delusional Pan-Slavic concepts.

One of the historic figures who represented the Russophile Pan-Slavic concept in Slovakia was Ľudovít Štúr, thinker and the codifier of modern Slovak language. Štúr was a cult figure, considered to be formative in terms of the linguistic and cultural identity of the Slovak nation. In his work *The Slavdom and the World of the Future*, published in 1867 in Russia, he dealt with the ultimate sense of history of Slavs and Slovaks.⁵ He came to conclusion that the optimal and only meaningful option for all Slavs, including Slovaks, who in the 19th century did not have their own independent statehood, would be unification

5 Ľudovít Štúr, *Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti*, [The Slavdom and the World of the Future] (Bratislava: Slovenský inštitút medzinárodných štúdií, 1993), <https://docplayer.cz/37569458-Ludovit-stur-slovanstvo-a-svet-buducnosti.html>.

with Russia and through this their de facto dissolution within the Russian nation (with use of Russian as official language), as well as conversion of all Slavs to Orthodox Christianity. (Štúr himself was Evangelical Protestant, Slovaks are overwhelmingly Catholic and in smaller part Protestant.) It is a paradox that a person who during his life and more than century and a half after his death was (and still is) considered the personalized epitome of Slovaks' efforts to sustain their independent national existence, eventually proposed for his nation such a solution for its historic destiny, which, if implemented, would mean its gradual disappearance as a separate ethnic entity with a specific language, culture, and historically inherited confessional characteristics. The state of affairs nowadays is absolutely different—Slovakia is an independent democratic state, a free society, part of the West, and actively participates in the Western integration projects (EU, NATO)—all this as a result of decisions and efforts of the dominant pro-Western national political and cultural elite.

There were some elements of Štúr's creed that were later used by other Slovak proponents of the idea of convergence with Russia (distancing from the liberal West, highlighting the special values of the Russian nation and state, etc.). In the first half of the 20th century the Russophile legacy was revived by the intellectual left-oriented (de facto pro-Communist) literary group DAV, whose members propagated Slovakia's inclination to Soviet Russia. This school of thought found a political umbrella for its activities in the Slovak Communist movement in the period before WWII. In its most radical form it expressed itself at the end of the WWII by flirting with the idea of "Sovietization of Slovakia," the affiliation of Slovakia to the USSR as the next union republic instead of the renewal of the common Czechoslovak state, broken as a result of Nazi aggression.

Attitudes towards Russia were also affected by the social experience of Slovakia's population after WWII. On the one hand, in February 1948 Communists who enjoyed the direct support of Moscow took power in Czechoslovakia and established an undemocratic, repressive regime. On the other hand, the Communist regime functioned in Slovakia under circumstances of delayed modernization. The gradual easing of differences that existed between Czech and Slovak parts within the Czechoslovak state in the socioeconomic area, such as the process of Slovakia's industrialization and urbanization, country's technological achievements in agriculture, building of the developed state education and health system—all these and some other elements of modern-

ization under Communist rule created preconditions for a less critical perception about the undemocratic nature of the regime implanted and supported from the outside.

In August 1968, the Soviet Union militarily suppressed the reform process in Czechoslovakia in what has been called the "Prague Spring." However, the process of "normalization" (i.e. cadre purge and removal of the Prague Spring reformist legacy) after the Soviet invasion chronologically coincided with the process of federalization of the Czechoslovak state that gave the Slovak population a feeling that national aspirations of Slovaks met their authentic forms. That also influenced the population's perception of sociopolitical developments and led to the softening of opposition against the Communist regime, and therefore the Soviet occupation, and created a less critical or even positive perception of the Soviet Union (later Russia).

Representative opinion polls conducted over a long showed a difference between Slovakia and other Visegrad states in terms of attitudes toward Russia. Slovaks are less critical of Russia and less pro-American than Hungarians, Czechs, and Poles. In the survey conducted by GLOBSEC Policy Institute in three Visegrad countries in 2016, 12 percent of respondents in Slovakia would prefer a pro-Russian orientation (in Hungary 6 percent, in the Czech Republic 4 percent).⁶ In the poll conducted by GLOBSEC in 2019, only 26 percent of Slovak respondents thought that Russia represented danger (significant threat) to their country (in Poland it was 77 percent, in the Czech Republic 52 percent, and in Hungary 31 percent). For comparison—in the same poll 41 percent of Slovaks thought that US represented a threat to their country (while in Poland it was 12 percent, in Hungary 16 percent, and in the Czech Republic 20 percent).⁷ Actors of Russian influence certainly help to solidify these trends in public opinion and public discourse and contribute to persistent geopolitical illusions about Slovakia as a bridge between East and West.

Since Russia is a country that is stagnating in multiple areas with severe social problems (corruption, ailing population, alcoholism, bad health care, heavy diseases, ethnic tensions) and technological backwardness, it

6 GLOBSEC Policy Institute, *GLOBSEC Trends. Central Europe under the Fire of Propaganda: Public Opinion Poll Analysis in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia* (Bratislava: GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 2016), https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/glb_trends_en.pdf.

7 Daniel Milo, Katarína Klingová, Dominika Hajdu, *GLOBSEC Trends 2019. Central & Eastern Europe 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain* (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2019), <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>.

is difficult in such conditions to build a positive image of Russia based on constructive alternatives. The main direction of activities aimed at strengthening Russia's influence has become not the presentation of positive Russia-related alternatives, but rather criticism of liberal democracy as a system, inducing resistance against it, provoking hatred towards the West, questioning the path of reforms in Central European countries which led to the establishment of the foundations of liberal democracy, reducing public support for membership in the EU and NATO, and opposing the policies of these groups. Russia's influence focuses on discovering and demonstrating the real or imagined shortcomings and problems in the functioning of the democratic system in local conditions, feeding the distrust in democratic mechanisms and institutions, and attributing the existent social problems to the essence of democratic order.

The narratives employed by actors of the Kremlin's influence in Slovakia are adjusted to the peculiarities of the political landscape in Slovakia. They include "theories" on the inappropriateness of liberal democracy as a system; the higher importance of Slavic solidarity and brotherhood over the importance of a political alliance with the West; that Russia is a natural defender of all Slavic nations; that Russia is a promoter of traditional and conservative social values and norms, and a protector from immoral liberal influence coming from the West; and that Russia is a liberator of Europe and the only sincere and genuine fighter against fascism and Nazism—during WWII and today.

SLOVAK-RUSSIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

Being an EU and NATO member state, Slovakia is generally engaged in relations with Russia on a multilateral level that shapes the basic framework of cooperation in particular areas. Slovak-Russian bilateral relations have been evolving since 1993 in certain cycles; their dynamic depended on the approach of the dominant political forces in both countries to the wider context of the international relations in Europe. The factor of dependence of the Slovak Republic on the Russian Federation in the area of energy also played its role.

Political parties that promoted Slovakia's clear pro-Western orientation—accession to NATO and membership in the EU (mostly programmatic liberal democratic center-right parties), tried to build Slovak-Russian relations so that they would not in any way complicate or

negatively affect implementation of the basic pro-Western course. These parties tried to separate cooperation in the economic sphere (mainly trade with energy materials) from the main priorities of the political agenda in order to minimize Russia's influence on domestic political development.

Parties which were not the main advocates of the country's pro-Western line (national populist formations with different declared creeds—"national," "social," "left," "right," etc.) handled the bilateral relations with Russia as not contravening to the overall pro-Western course. In foreign policy areas they promoted the concept of a sort of symbiosis of participation in the Euro-Atlantic integration and close relations and friendship with the Russian Federation. This attitude was represented in the last two decades mostly by party Smer-SD, and earlier by Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) of Vladimír Mečiar. Although this approach was called by representatives of these parties "pragmatic," in reality it was rather inconsistent and unrealistic. This approach underestimated the fact that Russia always retaliated against deeper integration of former Communist countries, including Slovakia, into the structures of the collective West.

Important developments which affected the Slovak-Russian relationship in the last six years were Russia's annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine and consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict for the system of international relations. As an EU member state, Slovakia joined and abided the common policy of sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia due to its aggression. However, Smer-SD's leader Robert Fico, who served as prime minister in 2012–2018, many times expressed his objections against the sanctions and persistently spoke about the need to lift them. In August 2016, Robert Fico visited Moscow and during his meeting with Vladimir Putin he said he did not see any reasons for decreasing mutual trade between Russia and Slovakia. Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, also from Smer-SD (who served in 2018–2020), continued this line. He characterized the sanctions as ineffective, useless, and even harmful for Slovakia's economy. Speaker of Parliament Andrej Danko from the SNS (who served in 2016–2020), known for his close personal relations with the Russian State Duma speaker Viacheslav Volodin, frequently visited Moscow and presented views contradictory to the common EU policies toward Russia. He de facto behaved as an advocate of Russia's interests.

However, with all this Slovakia did not initiate any steps which would change the EU's policy of sanctions

against Russia. On the other hand, the fact that prominent Slovak politicians (Danko, Pellegrini, Fico) publicly expressed—and even directly in Russia—views dissenting from the common EU's positions, assisted the spread of pro-Russian narratives in Slovak society (including the idea about the high importance and irreplaceability of Slovak-Russian economic ties⁸). It led to the formation of an inadequate, misleading image of Russia and Russian policies toward Slovakia and its allies among considerable part of Slovakia's population.

Symptomatic in this context were findings about Russia's activities inside Slovakia disclosed by the Slovak special services. According to the 2018 annual report of the Slovak intelligence service (SIS), "the activities of Russian intelligence services were directed against the protected interests of the Slovak Republic as a member of the EU and NATO. Members of the Russian intelligence services operating in the Slovak Republic, mostly under diplomatic cover, sought to recruit employees in the central bodies of state administration, security forces and in the field of energy and defense."⁹ SIS notes that Russia "continued to regard the Euro-Atlantic community as its main geopolitical rival and a threat to its security and stability."¹⁰ In the section on hybrid threats the SIS report informs that in Slovakia, the "Russian Federation has been developing activities that were primarily aimed at keeping the Slovak public sympathetic to Russia, its culture and politics, and at weakening forces openly skeptical or critical of Russia. The Russian side also sought to create an impression among its own domestic as well as foreign audiences that the Slovak Republic is a close ally

8 However, according to official statistics, the parameters of Slovakia's trade with Russia are today less significant than before 2014. In August 2020, Slovakia's export to Russia represented 1.6 % of the country's total exports; import from Russia represented 5.5 % of total Slovakia's imports. For comparison, Slovakia's export to EU member-states constituted 79.9% of the total country's exports and import from the EU-member-states constituted 65.1% of the total Slovakia's imports – see: "Celkový dovoz a celkový vývoz podľa kontinentov a ekonomických zoskupení krajín," [Total imports and total exports by continents and economic groupings of countries], Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (website), 2020, [http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosext/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeId\(%22i10B2CB52FFF44B319DA31F65A3FFE155%22\)&ui.name=Celkov%3%bd%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%3%bd%20v%3%bdvov%20pod%4%bea%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%3%bdch%20zoskupen%3%ad%20kraj%3%adn%20v%20roku%202014%20%5bzo0002ms%5d&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosext%2fcps4%2fportlets%2fcommon%2fclose.html&run.outputLocale=sk](http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosext/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeId(%22i10B2CB52FFF44B319DA31F65A3FFE155%22)&ui.name=Celkov%3%bd%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%3%bd%20v%3%bdvov%20pod%4%bea%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%3%bdch%20zoskupen%3%ad%20kraj%3%adn%20v%20roku%202014%20%5bzo0002ms%5d&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosext%2fcps4%2fportlets%2fcommon%2fclose.html&run.outputLocale=sk)

9 Slovak Information Service, *Správa o činnosti SIS za rok 2018*. Bratislava, jún 2019, [Report on activities of the Slovak Information Service in 2018. Bratislava, June 2019], <http://www.sis.gov.sk/pre-vas/sprava-o-cinnosti.html#uvod>.

10 Slovak Information Service, *Správa o činnosti SIS za rok 2018*.

of Russia, which, as a member of NATO and the EU, respects and understands Russian interests."¹¹

At the end of September 2020, the Slovak Information Service (SIS) published a report on its activities in 2019. According to the SIS, "members of the Russian intelligence services, operating on the territory of the Slovak Republic mainly under diplomatic cover, sought to infiltrate the central state administration and security forces and to acquire collaborators in the energy and military fields. They regularly participated in professional events focused on energy and military issues, where they tried to contact the interested persons with access to sensitive classified information from the EU and NATO environment, as well as persons close to the highest state officials."¹²

The document continued with a chapter on hybrid threats, in which the SIS pointed out that "Slovakia, as an EU and NATO member state, faced influence campaigns mainly from foreign powers aimed at weakening the political cohesion of both international organizations in order to disrupt their unity, [and their] ability to act and defend themselves. Foreign actors have focused on influencing elites, the professional community, and the population with the aim to produce mistrust in these international organizations and questioning the Allies' willingness to fulfil their solidarity obligations the membership in these organizations assumes." SIS stated that "the primary sources of campaigns aimed at discrediting the EU and NATO were Russian sources (official media, state institutions, think tanks, experts), which formed the strategic direction of this communication. Their messages were subsequently adopted by similarly oriented media and organizations in European countries. The main disseminators of pro-Russian narratives in the Slovak Republic were pro-Russian non-governmental organizations and groups on social networks, Russian news media, including their foreign branches, and the so-called alternative media. As in the previous period, Russian propaganda, to a high degree, used pro-Russian sympathizers, who out of their own convictions uncritically adapted and further spread these messages."¹³

Compared to the SIS report for the previous year, in this year's report information on influence operations was more detailed and specific, especially with regard to

11 Slovak Information Service, *Správa o činnosti SIS za rok 2018*.

12 Slovak Information Service, *Správa o činnosti SIS za rok 2019*.

Bratislava, september 2020, [Report on activities of the Slovak Information Service in 2019. Bratislava, September 2020], <https://www.sis.gov.sk/pre-vas/sprava-o-cinnosti-2019.html>.

13 Slovak Information Service, *Správa o činnosti SIS za rok 2019*.

domestic, Slovak disseminators of Russian influence. Unambiguous formulations of Slovak intelligence analysts painted a picture of a branched ecosystem of activities aimed at damaging the country's internal democratic organization and its foreign policy ties.

The clear-cut pro-Western line in the country's foreign policy in recent years is represented by President Andrej Kiska (2004–2019) and his successor Zuzana Čaputová (inaugurated in June 2019). Both heads of the state supported the sanctions against Russia and emphasized the need to strengthen Slovakia's ties and cooperation with the EU and NATO. The stances of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were basically in accordance with the positions of presidents.

Three parties of the current ruling coalition formed in March 2020—the center-right, prevailingly conservative movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), the libertarian party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), and the liberal-conservative party Za ľudí (For People)—can be characterized as clearly pro-Western, pro-EU, and pro-NATO, both on the level of program and stances of their individual representatives. The fourth member of the coalition—the socially conservative populist movement *Sme rodina* (We Are Family)—is a partner of Marine Le Pen's National Rally and Matteo Salvini's Lega. Although its representatives do not present openly pro-Russian views, the movement's positions on foreign policy are marked by certain unclearness. The movement, however, promised that as a ruling party it would be strictly pursuing the overall pro-EU and pro-NATO line in the country's foreign policy and external security. It is worth noting that in previous years, despite *We Are Family's* partnership with Le Pen and Salvini, it did not act as an actor of Russian influence.

A conglomerate of local actors exists in Slovakia that openly features in favor of closer cooperation with Russia, and it varies from the extreme left to the extreme right.

POLITICS

The political segment of this conglomerate includes the marginal Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), which did not run in the recent parliamentary elections in February 2020; the radical nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), which dropped out from the parliament in February 2020 after the elections with 3.16 percent of votes; and the nationalist local “alt-right” party *Vlasť* (“Motherland”), founded by former Minister of Justice Štefan Harabin, which failed to enter the parliament in February 2020 with 2.93 percent of votes.

The most relevant openly pro-Russian political force in Slovakia is the neo-fascist party People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), elected in parliament in 2016 and re-elected in 2020 with similar results (7.97 percent). This party expresses clearly pro-Russian stances in foreign policy combining them with fierce anti-EU and anti-NATO views. It demands Slovakia's withdrawal from both organizations. There are two Members of the European Parliament elected in 2019 on the ĽSNS list who present in the European Parliament consistent pro-Kremlin views, advocating Russia's foreign policy. Moreover, one of them, Milan Uhrík, praises the Kremlin's domestic politics and recommends using Russia's experience *pro domo* in Slovakia. In one of his blog posts titled “Inspiration for Slovak politics—more national pride and less humiliation” he wrote: “The Russians approved in a popular vote major changes in the Russian constitution—a clear anchoring of traditional values, ensuring the defense of their own sovereignty, and also the enactment of raising pension and social standards. Some criticize the vote for allowing Putin to run for president again, but this is not surprising given his high popularity. In any case, many of the changes adopted are good and could be an inspiration for Slovak politics as well—for more national pride and less humiliation. For good cooperation with Russia.”¹⁴

The previous ruling party *Smer-SD*, the self-declared “social democrats,” is an opportunistic mixture of politicians who—with few exceptions—avoid presenting their views on foreign policy and relations with other states. None of them can be considered as a sincere, commit-

PRO-KREMLIN'S LOBBIES

14 Milan Uhrík, <https://hlas-parlamentu.sk/politik/milan-uhrik>.

ted, and active supporter of the country's pro-Western orientation. The most spectacular and vocal exception however, on the opposite, pro-Russian, side is Smer-SD's MP, party's vice-chairman, Ľuboš Blaha, who calls himself "Marxist and leftist." Blaha is an open supporter of Russia's foreign policy, approving the annexation of Crimea, the concept of "Novorossiia," the Russian occupation of part of Ukraine's Donbas, and Russia's confrontation with the West. He is a fervent opponent of the "liberal" West, the US, NATO and the EU, a critic of Israel and a sympathizer of "left-leaning" authoritarian regimes (China, Venezuela, Cuba, Syria) as well as Iran. Blaha's typical optic in his perception of the global situation in the world and Slovakia's position in the context of relations between the West and Russia can be seen in the following statement made on July 1, 2020: "Today is a black day for Slovakia. We have officially become a colony of the USA. ... Do you know what happened today? Matovič's government recognized Guaido as a president of Venezuela. ... The American Embassy gave the order and Minister [of Foreign Affairs] Korčok ran with his tongue out and fulfilled without grumbling what his masters commanded. ... Korčok sold us again. And it will continue. Soon there will be here the American bases, American weapons of mass destruction, American 'advisers,' American soldiers ... And they will drive us to war with Russia. That's what it's all about."¹⁵

During his three tenures as prime minister (2006–2010, 2012–2016 and 2016–2018), Smer-SD's leader Robert Fico had to demonstrate his basic compliance with the country's official pro-Western foreign policy; however as a party leader and a private person even then he repeatedly expressed his sympathies to Russia and other states with authoritarian regimes. After his resignation in 2018 he became an open opponent of the Western approach to Russia and a supporter of the world's autocrats (in August 2010 he criticized the EU for its critical stance to developments in Belarus and sanctions imposed on Lukashenka's regime).

ACADEMIA AND CULTURE

15 Ľuboš Blaha, "Čierny deň pre Slovensko – budú nás hnať do vojny s Ruskom," [Black day for Slovakia – they will drive us to war with Russia], *Nové slovo*, July 7, 2020, https://www.noveslovo.sk/prispevok-v-blogu/Cierny_den_pre_Slovensko_budu_nas_hnat_do_vojny_s_Ruskom.

Russian state-sponsored organizations and their local partners conduct common activities in Slovakia in the areas of culture and academia, especially in the humanities and social sciences. The possible reasons for involving local actors into pro-Russian activities include political and ideological considerations, personal value preferences, and last but not least, material interests. Seemingly, the most appealing thing that Russia can offer to pro-Russian local actors in Slovakia is an opportunity to be identified with the narratives which are closed to the value orientations of these actors (nationalism, pan-Slavism, nostalgia for the Communist or even pre-Communist authoritarian past, illiberal political views, anti-Western, anti-EU and NATO attitudes, criticism of liberal democracy). For some people, the attraction can also be an opportunity to visit Russia (for example, for participation in "prestigious" meetings such as Valdai Club sessions), to lecture in Russian academic institutions (universities), to publish articles in Russian scholarly periodicals, and to enjoy "professional recognition" in Russia, and other things.

Russian institutions organize events in Slovakia aimed at promoting Russia's views about the world's development, historical events, the situation in Europe, and current international relations. The key player in these attempts is the Embassy of the Russian Federation, whose representatives, including the ambassador and senior diplomats, participate directly in the events and provide organizational support. In the sphere of social sciences and humanities the Russian organizations, in cooperation with local partners, organize conferences and other events for experts with specially selected speakers (Russian, Slovak or international) on the topics directly related to current developments in international affairs, Russia's foreign policy, journalism, Slovak-Russian relations. Part of the picture is individual activities of Russian scholars invited to Slovakia by the Russian Embassy or Russian Center for Science and Culture (lectures, participation in public events). The list of Russian lecturers and guests includes some known names—Stalinist propagandist Nikolay Starikov, historian Sviatoslav Rybas, political scientist Andranik Migranian, political analyst Vladimir Kozin, film director Nikita Mikhalkov, and others.

The efforts of Russian state institutions to infiltrate the space of independent social and policy analysis, however, has their limits due to the fact that the community of Slovak independent scholars working in analytical centers (think tanks) is strongly pro-Western and pro-Atlanticist. Therefore, Russian institutions (embassy, state agencies, academia, etc.) rather opt for cooperation with Slovak

public (state-sponsored) academic institutions—universities and institutes of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The reasons for closer cooperation between these institutions and Russian partners are often personal, including individual scholars' critical attitude to globalization considered as the "US-lead process," to the role of the West ("domination of the USA," "aggressive policies") that allegedly tries to diminish the role of other states, including Russia, and general distrust of liberal democracy. Some of such scholars have a track record of working in the official structures of the former Communist regime.

In the sphere of culture and art, the main Russian actor in Slovakia is the Russian Center of Science and Culture that separately or in cooperation with other institutions (local agencies, associations of Russian expats, representatives of some local self-governments, business groups, etc.) organizes cultural events combining art production (musical, visual, literary) with deliverance of sociopolitical messages and dissemination of Russian "patriotic" narratives (exhibitions dedicated to anniversaries of the liberation of Slovakia and Bratislava from Nazi Germany or Victory Day in WWII, photo exhibitions about events in "Novorossiia," concerts of the Alexandrov Ensemble (the official army choir of the Russian armed forces) with local pop-singers, visits of "Night Wolves" motorbike gang, festivals of Russian culture, performances of Russian dramatic actors and musicians, memorial events "Immortal regiment," celebrations of anniversaries of Yuri Gagarin's flight to space, the international festival "Day of Slavs," movies projection, exhibitions of Soviet posters, etc.). Some of these events attract a relatively limited audience, others, however, are attended by a large number of participants. The Center also directly influences the activities of Russian expats, organizing and supervising the social contacts and networks between Slovak alumni of Russian and Soviet universities and high schools.

MEDIA

Attempts to strengthen Russia's influence in Slovakia would be unimaginable without actions on the media scene. There are, however, certain specifics here. The possibilities of Russian state media to directly influence the Slovak population are limited. Unlike in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, there are no national language versions of Russian media outlets in Slovakia.

Although selected Russian TV channels can be viewed in Slovakia on some TV cable networks (nationwide and local), the national monitoring of TV broadcast-

ing so far did not indicate any Russian channel among those which are mostly watched. The share of viewers of Russian channels is statistically insignificant. Taking into consideration the limited possibilities of Russian media to directly penetrate Slovak public space, it is logical that the main media channels of the Kremlin's ideological infiltration are domestic outlets. However, these are not mainstream media, since among Slovak mainstream ("serious") outlets there is a prevalent tone criticizing Russia and its foreign policy, but rather fringe, conspiratorial and disinformation outlets. These outlets constitute an openly pro-Russian camp on Slovakia's media scene. It needs to be said that after the inception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, dozens of online resources in Slovak and Czech languages were activated and disseminated pro-Russian content and propagandist narratives.¹⁶

Web portal HlavneSpravy.sk (Main News), located in Košice, is an outlet spreading pro-Russian narratives in a sophisticated manner, mixing news from mainstream media (press and online outlets and agencies) with its own comments. It also translates and publishes contributions taken from various Russian media. Pro-Russian stances are accompanied by open criticism of policies of the Western states. HlavneSpravy.sk is considered the main disseminator of pro-Russian content on the media scene in Slovakia.

The monthly *Zem a Vek* (Earth and Age) is a periodical of conspiratorial type that publicizes material about the domination of the US and Zionism (Jews) over the world, a typical anti-Semitic media outlet. Articles published in this magazine are characterized by systemic resistance to values of liberal democracy and criticism of the West, the EU and NATO, as well as by positive attitudes towards the current political regime in Russia. In the Russian-Ukrainian conflict the magazine took a stance similar to Russian propaganda. It openly supported the separatist rebellion on Donbas.

The online radio station Slobodný vysielač (Free Broadcaster) is a fringe outlet established in 2013. It combines anti-corruption rhetoric with calls for direct or "true" democracy, along with a broad range of esoteric and conspiracy topics. It offers broadcasting space inter alia to persons whose views are marked by open sympathies to Russia's foreign policy, harsh criticism of liberal

16 Ivana Smoleňová, *The Pro-Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Types of Media Spreading pro-Russian Propaganda, Their Characteristics and Frequently Used Narratives* (Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute, 2015), http://www.hom-bre.cz/images/253_is-pro-russian-campaign.pdf.

democracy and the West, and anti-Semitic rhetoric.

The “left” side of the pro-Russian camp on Slovakia’s media scene consists of several platforms close to former ruling party Smer-SD. Clear pro-Russian attitudes and an extremely critical tone towards the West—EU, USA, NATO (and Ukraine since 2014) are typical for articles publicized in the biweekly *Slovenský rozhľad* (Slovak Outlook). Authors supported Robert Fico in his opposition against some EU policies and approved all his activities aimed at strengthening cooperation with Russia. “Leftist” web portal *Slovo* (Word), is an outlet publishing contributions with pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, anti-American, and anti-Western content. The similarly themed articles, but formulated in a more nationalist and conspiratorial spirit, are publicized by biweekly periodical *Literárny týždenník* (Literary Weekly) and monthly *Extra Plus*. The content of the contributions in these outlets corresponds to the overall orientation of these periodicals, which is marked by criticism of the pro-Western line in Slovakia’s foreign policy, opposition to liberal socioeconomic reforms, state interventionism, disagreement with NATO activities, criticism of various aspects of European integration and EU policies, anti-Americanism, nationalism, and evident inclinations to the policy of Russia’s leadership. *Bojovník* (the Warrior), a biweekly periodical of the Slovak Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, publishes materials taken directly from Russian sources that spreads Russian narratives, including those on the struggle against “Ukrainian fascism,” and it openly supported separatist rebels in Donbas.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of Russia’s efforts to strengthen its influence in Central Europe, including Slovakia, show that the ultimate goal of Russia’s policy is to weaken the countries’ ties with the EU and NATO to the lowest possible level, and, if the situation would allow, to achieve their withdrawal from these Western groupings. Efforts in this direction embrace a variety of steps: support for local political forces and personalities which hold anti-EU and anti-NATO stances to create favorable conditions for anti-Western foreign policy, and influence public discourse according to propaganda templates to provoke resistance against European integration and a transatlantic partnership. In this context Slovakia’s case can serve as a part of the broader picture and as an indication of trends leading to disunity inside the EU and NATO, and to growing internal disputes and conflicts in the Western community. The weaker the ties with the EU and NATO, the stronger

the relations between Slovakia and Russia—this can be taken as an axiom of the Kremlin’s attitude.

The experience of the last two decades shows that the nature of Slovak-Russian relations and the conditions for Russia’s efforts to strengthen its influence in Slovakia depend to a large extent on domestic factors, mainly the balance of power between proponents and opponents of the country’s pro-Western choice. The stronger the position of liberal democracy actors on the political scene and in the system of power institutions, the weaker the Kremlin’s chances of penetrating the vital sectors of Slovak society. From this point of view, the results of the Slovak parliamentary elections in February 2020 should not increase the Kremlin’s chances.

FREE
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