

**FREE**  
RUSSIA



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# CONCEPTUALIZING MALIGN INFLUENCE OF PUTIN'S RUSSIA IN EUROPE

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## INFLUENCE AND POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Influence, as the Cambridge Dictionary defines it, is “the power to have an effect on people or things,” and it would not be an exaggeration to say that all states, to one degree or another, try to exert influence on other states.

As its definition implies, *influence* is closely linked to *power* which represents the ability to influence how someone or something behaves, develops or thinks, or to cause someone to change their behavior, belief or opinion when that would not have occurred otherwise. In the context of international relations and on the basis of the close connection between influence and power, Joseph S. Nye introduced the concepts of hard power and soft power.<sup>1</sup> *Hard power* is the ability to exert influence over other nations through coercion that implies using military threats, sanctions and/or bribery. In turn, *soft power* is the ability to influence through affinity and attraction with resources such as a nation's political values, culture, and foreign policies.

In recent years, as authoritarian regimes increasingly challenged the democratic West, experts developed new terms in an effort to identify those aspects of power and influence that made the challenge of authoritarian regimes especially distressing.

In 2013, elaborating on Nye's concept of soft power in relation to Putin's Russia, James Sherr argued that, when discussing the country's influence abroad, a better way would be to talk not of soft power but rather of soft coercion. Sherr defined the latter as “influence that is indirectly coercive, resting on covert methods (penetration, bribery, blackmail) and on new forms of power, such as energy supply, which are difficult to define as hard or soft.”<sup>2</sup>

Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig also found it difficult to identify particular influence techniques used by authoritarian regimes such as Putin's Russia and Xi's China as related to either hard power or soft power. Therefore, they wrote of *sharp power* to characterize malign, aggressive, and manipulative aspects of influence operations of authoritarian states in democratic societies. Unlike soft power, sharp power “is not a ‘charm offensive,’ nor is it an effort to ‘share alternative ideas’ or ‘broaden the debate.’ It is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on manipulation and distraction.”<sup>3</sup>

*Mimetic power* is another useful concept to employ in discussions about the approaches of authoritarian regimes to wield influence in the democratic West. *Mimetic power* can be defined as the ability to influence Western nations by creating

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1 Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); idem, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

2 James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (London: Chatham House, 2013), 2.

3 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, “From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power’: Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World,” in *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* (Washington: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), 10.

the impression that authoritarian regimes are normal members of the international community and emulating what authoritarian regimes perceive as Western soft power techniques.<sup>4</sup> The idea behind mimetic power is that, for example, Putin's Russia is no better and no worse than any other Western country: even if Moscow behaves in an apparently questionable way, it is still normal because Western capitals allegedly do the same.

Another power-related concept that is useful for analysing influence of authoritarian regimes in democratic societies is *dark power*. The term appeared in 2007,<sup>5</sup> but was not properly conceptualized until very recently. Mark Galeotti offered arguably the most significant contribution to the conceptualisation of dark power: "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. [. . .] If you are going to be a bully, then be a fearsome and formidable one. That way, rivals are deterred from challenging you, and are inclined to pacify you with deals and exemptions."<sup>6</sup> Drawing on the discussions of dark power by Galeotti and ourselves,<sup>7</sup> we can define it as the ability to influence preferences and behavior of other nations through projecting an image of a state inherently antagonistic to their political values. Wielding dark power is about producing an image of a country that opposes the "Western hypocrisy" of liberal democracy, has the right to behave irresponsibly on the international stage, and is able to corrupt democracy in other countries.

The above-mentioned interpretations and definitions of sharp power, mimetic power and dark power suggest that these concepts are related to deception as an instrument employed by authoritarian regimes in their relations with democratic states. Hence, it seems natural that these types of power can be linked to specific forms of what the Soviet forces called *maskirovka*, "a set of processes employed during the Soviet era designed to mislead, confuse, and interfere with anyone accurately assessing its plans, objectives, strengths, and weaknesses."<sup>8</sup> One Soviet military dictionary argues that these forms include concealment, imitation, simulation, demonstrative actions, and disinformation.<sup>9</sup> Although the Soviet forces originally applied the concept of *maskirovka* only to particular aspects of kinetic warfare, they would later use it to describe political, economic and diplomatic measures. In the context of this paper, we can argue that mimetic power corresponds to such forms of *maskirovka* as imitation and simulation, while sharp power and dark power draw upon disinformation and demonstrative actions.

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4 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/>.

5 Charles S. Maier, "Dark Power: Globalization, Inequality, and Conflict," *Harvard International Review* 29, no. 1 (2007): 60-65.

6 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 Anton Shekhovtsov, "How Vladislav Surkov Joined the Russian Order of Dark Power," *Political Capital Institute*, April 8, 2019, [https://politicalcapital.hu/russian\\_sharp\\_power\\_in\\_cee/publications.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2382](https://politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/publications.php?article_read=1&article_id=2382).

8 Timothy C. Shea, "Post-Soviet Maskirovka, Cold War Nostalgia, and Peacetime Engagement," *Military Review* 82 no. 3 (May/June 2002): 63-67. See also Charles L. Smith, "Soviet Maskirovka," *Airpower* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 28-39.

9 *Sovetskaya voennaya entsiklopediya*, 5 (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976), s.v. "Maskirovka."

## MALIGN INFLUENCE

Nye wrote that a nation is more likely to produce soft power or, in other words, to implement the ability to influence other societies through affinity and attraction “when a country’s culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share [. . .]. Narrow values and parochial cultures are less likely to produce soft power.”<sup>10</sup> From this we can conjecture that influence emanating from soft power is normatively positive: when a state tries to influence the behavior of another state by appealing to shared universal values and common interests, it effectively strengthens the universal value system thus contributing to the building of a global culture of human rights and achieving long-term balance and stability in international relations.

In contrast, authoritarian regimes based on non-democratic value systems use soft coercion, sharp power, mimetic power and dark power with the intent to mislead and confuse democratic nations and their leadership, hence the influence emanating from these approaches is inevitably negative in the normative sense and is termed here as malicious.

We define *malicious influence* in the European context as a *specific type of influence that directly or indirectly subverts and undermines European values and democratic institutions*. We follow the Treaty on European Union in understanding *European values* that are the following:

- human dignity
- freedom
- democracy
- equality
- the rule of law
- respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities<sup>11</sup>

*Democratic institutions* are guardians of European values, and among them we highlight:

- *representative political parties* that aggregate, organize and articulate citizens’ political demands, translate these demands into policy proposals, engage citizens in the democratic process, provide the basis for coordinated legislative activity, and advance government accountability
- *free and fair elections* in which voters should be able to form opinions independently and free of violence or threats of violence, compulsion, or manipulative interference of any kind
- *an impartial justice system* free of discrimination or favoritism
- *free, independent and pluralistic media* that provide objective and accurate

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<sup>10</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union,” *EUR-Lex*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M%2FTXT>.

reporting, guarantee access to diverse views and meaningful opinions, monitor public officials, foster democratic debate, and encourage active involvement of citizens in political and social life

■ *a robust civil society* that holds public institutions accountable on issues of democracy and human rights, helps preserve democratic vibrancy, presents opportunities for collective action, builds community cohesion, and helps citizens articulate their interests and demands.

The main effect of malign influence is erosion and decline of European values, as well as deepening distrust of democratic institutions.

Before discussing motifs, agents, and instruments of malign influence of Putin's Russia in Europe, one caveat is in order. The fact that this authoritarian regime wields malign influence does not mean that Russia cannot produce soft power in Europe. Russia's major source of soft power is its high culture that comprises of literature (especially humanist writings), classical music, ballet, etc., and Russia has doubtlessly made an important historical contribution to world culture. The problem for Putin's regime is that it has only limited access to this source, because the Kremlin's activities and behavior in the international arena compromise the positive effects of Russia's traditional soft power. One dramatic example here is the sharp decline of Russia as a sport superpower after the disclosure of the massive state-sponsored doping program that led to several temporary bans from the most important international sport events.

## MALIGN INFLUENCE AS AN EFFECT OF POLITICAL WARFARE

It seems appropriate to discuss Russian malign influence in Europe in the framework of a political war that Putin's regime wages against Europe. Although the term "political warfare" was first introduced by the British forces during the Second World War, it was George F. Kennan, a leading American diplomat during the Cold War, who elaborated on the concept of political warfare in 1948: "political warfare is the employment of all means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP [i.e. Economic Recovery Plan, better known as The Marshall Plan]), and 'white' propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, 'black' psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states."<sup>12</sup> According to Paul A. Smith, "political war may be combined with violence, economic pressure, subversion, and diplomacy, but its chief aspect is the use of words, images, and ideas, commonly known, according to context, as propaganda and psychological warfare."<sup>13</sup> Today, political warfare is seen as a grey area between, on the one hand, regular political, diplomatic, economic and other interactions, and, on the other, high-order war, i.e. "intense, declared conventional or nuclear war between the armed forces of two or more nation-states."<sup>14</sup>

The framework of *political warfare* is useful for understanding malign influence and delineating its meaning. In times of peace, authoritarian regimes build their relations with democratic societies predominantly on the basis of traditional and public diplomacy, trade and cultural exchange, which implies the employment of soft power on the part of authoritarian regimes no matter how limited their access is to it. However, in a situation of crisis, nations tend to "deform" all areas of cooperation they enjoyed during peace time. Traditional and public diplomacy are poisoned by the downgrading of communications and projections of hard power, routine trade is crippled by sanctions and trade wars, and soft power degenerates into dark power, mimetic power and/or sharp power. If the crisis is not resolved quickly, political warfare emerges.<sup>15</sup> As an effect of political warfare, malign influence does not belong to the areas of cooperation in times of peace, but—while it is not a repercussion of high-order war—it can be observed throughout such war. Figure 1 demonstrates the forms that power and influence take during times of peace, political warfare, and high-order war.

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<sup>12</sup> State Department Policy Planning Staff, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare," *United States Department of State*, April 30, 1948, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d269>.

<sup>13</sup> Paul A. Smith, *On Political War* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Connable et al., *Russia's Hostile Measures: Combating Russian Gray Zone Aggression Against NATO in the Contact, Blunt, and Surge Layers of Competition* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Waller argues that political warfare is an outcome of a situation "when public relations statements and gentle, public diplomacy-style persuasion—the policies of attraction that constitute 'soft power'—fail to win the needed sentiments and actions" Michael Waller, "Getting Serious about Strategic Influence: How to Move beyond the State Department's Legacy of Failure," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 17 (2009): 24.

Peacetime	Political war	High-order war
Soft power	Projections of hard power	Hard power
	Mimetic power	
	Sharp power	
Dark power		
Traditional influence	Malign influence	

Figure 1. Power and malign influence during times of peace, political warfare, and high-order war

For example, disinformation may imply different things depending on the particular context. In times of peace, disinformation may be created for profit (mercenary fake news) or for purposes of humor (satirical fake news).<sup>16</sup> Publishing false orders about diversionary landings or movements of troops is considered disinformation in times of war. Spreading manipulated pictures in order to confuse and disrupt a nation's opponents can be considered disinformation as part of political warfare or high-order war. In none of the cases can we talk about malign influence, unless disinformation is produced to manipulate public sentiment which leads—in the European context—to subversion of European values and/or undermining of democratic institutions. Likewise, neither corporate espionage nor money laundering necessarily produces malign influence despite the unwelcome nature of these criminal activities. Only when crime appears to be part of political warfare (for example, used to wield political influence or carry out targeted political assassinations<sup>17</sup>) can we talk about malign influence deriving from crime.

Furthermore, the relationship between political warfare and malign influence allows us to solve the question of whether this type of influence is an offensive or defensive measure. Any warfare implies both, so—in the context of Putin's Russia and Europe—the aggressive subversion and undermining of European values and democratic institutions is mirrored by the Kremlin's willingness to defend from Western influence what it considers as its own values and institutions. This echoes how some experts and practitioners understand information warfare, namely as "actions taken to *preserve the integrity of one's own information system* from exploitation, corruption, or disruption, while at the same time *exploiting, corrupting, or destroying an adversary's information system* and, [in] the process, achieving an information advantage in the application of force."<sup>18</sup>

16 On the forms of fake news see Donald A. Barclay, *Fake News, Propaganda, and Plain Old Lies: How to Find Trustworthy Information in the Digital Age* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

17 Mark Galeotti, "Crimintern: How the Kremlin Uses Russia's Criminal Networks in Europe," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 18, 2017, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/crimintern\\_how\\_the\\_kremlin\\_uses\\_russias\\_criminal\\_networks\\_in\\_europe](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/crimintern_how_the_kremlin_uses_russias_criminal_networks_in_europe).

18 A definition of information warfare by the US Department of Defense, cited in Edward Waltz, *Information Warfare: Principles and Operations* (Boston: Artech House, 1998): 20 (emphasis added).



## STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL GOALS OF RUSSIAN MALIGN INFLUENCE

Elaborating on their concept of sharp power, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig argue: “powerful and determined authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression in order to maintain power at home, are increasingly applying the same principles internationally to secure their interests.”<sup>19</sup> This insight helps us conceptualize the major motifs of Russian state or non-state actors wielding malign influence in Europe, as it was Russian society that was the first victim of malign influence operations conducted by the Kremlin and its loyalists. In other words, before they started to wage a political war against the West in general and Europe in particular, the pro-Kremlin actors first undermined and subverted European values and democratic institutions at home.

Starting from Putin's first presidential term, the pro-Kremlin actors increasingly:

- took away freedoms and liberties from the Russian people
- destroyed the rule of law replacing it with the rule of political considerations, cronyism, and nepotism
- degraded human rights and practices aimed at their defense
- put pressure on civil society and NGOs
- clamped down on political opposition
- undermined the free and fair character of electoral processes

All of these actions were needed in order to do away with democratic principles—no matter how weak they were during Boris Yeltsin's rule—to establish control over all Russian political institutions, and to enervate Russian society, thus securing the unlimited rule of Putin's authoritarian and kleptocratic regime. The Kremlin has projected its domestic agenda of subverting democratic values and institutions onto Europe in its political war against the West. From this perspective, one can concur with James Sherr who argues that the overarching aim of Putin's Russia is “the creation of an international environment conducive to the maintenance of its system of governance at home.”<sup>20</sup>

It must be stressed, however, that there are different degrees of assertiveness in influencing the international environment, and—as argued before—it is natural that nations are, to different extents, involved in the process of influencing other states. For example, strategies of public diplomacy in times of peace can be based on *engagement* or *shaping*. In the case of engagement, nations aim to “inject new thinking and ideas,” “create shared resources,” “promote dialogue” and/or “fashion a common language.”<sup>21</sup> In the case of shaping, the task is to reframe debates between nations by creating fresh perspectives, developing new concepts, chang-

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19 Walker and Ludwig, “From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power,’” 10.

20 Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*, 96 (the original emphasis omitted).

21 Alex Evans and David Steven, “Towards a Theory of Influence for Twenty-first Century Foreign Policy: The New Public Diplomacy in a Globalized World,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 6, no. 1 (2010): 24.

ing the language of the debates, promoting rule of law and human rights.<sup>22</sup>

But there are *disruptive* and *destructive* public diplomacy strategies too, and nations resort to using them when engagement and shaping strategies do not seem to be effective. A disruptive strategy of public diplomacy is employed when a nation faces an unwelcome consensus. The aims of this strategy are to “probe points of weakness,” “exploit wedge issues,” “redefine the terms of the debate,” “create a counter-narrative,” “galvanize allies,” “divide, co-opt, or marginalize opponents.”<sup>23</sup> A destructive strategy of public diplomacy is used when a nation does not see there to be an opportunity for further debate with what it considers its adversaries. Public diplomacy informed by this strategy aims “to sow confusion, fear and panic” through disinformation, “encourage dissention and defection” and “isolate enemies.”<sup>24</sup> It is these strategies of public diplomacy that produce malign influence as an effect of political warfare conducted within the circumstances of a perceived crisis.

While the malign influence of Putin’s Russia subverts and undermines European values and democratic institutions, these are not necessarily the primary targets of Russian influence operations. There is a difference between the effects of malign influence in our perspective and the aims of Putin’s Russia.

We identify two major strategic goals of Putin’s Russia when it engages in political warfare that produces malign influence.

The first goal is to protect Russian society from Western ideological, political, cultural, and other influences believed to undermine the grip on power held by Putin’s regime. This goal is attained by discrediting European values and democratic institutions in the eyes of the Russian people. To this effect, Putin’s regime pushes the idea that Europe is only interested in promoting European values in order to acquire advantage in geopolitical competition with Russia: narratives about democracy and rule of law are needed to denigrate the Russian authorities and pit Russian citizens against the regime; narratives about equality and human rights are directed at subverting Russian traditional, conservative values. The bottom line here is that European nations themselves care neither about democracy nor freedom nor human rights—they only weaponize these values against Russia.

The second goal is to advance the political, economic and security interests of Putin’s Russia on the international stage. The Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors strive to attain this goal through shaping the international environment in the image and semblance of Putin’s regime, and—to this end—seek to corrupt major democratic institutions such as political parties, elections, justice systems, media and civil society.

Putin’s regime and pro-Kremlin loyalists try to achieve these two strategic goals by meeting various tactical objectives. These objectives include, but are not limited to, weakening of Europe’s transatlantic contacts, poisoning of bilateral relations between European states, spreading disorder on the international stage, retaining former Soviet states in the Russian sphere of influence, hindering modernization of democratizing European states, undermining trust in the EU and NATO, etc.

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22 Evans and Steven, “Towards a Theory of Influence,” 24.

23 Evans and Steven, “Towards a Theory of Influence,” 24.

24 Evans and Steven, “Towards a Theory of Influence,” 24.

## AREAS, TOOLS, AND OPERATORS OF RUSSIAN MALIGN INFLUENCE

It is important to distinguish between tools of political warfare (and malign influence) and areas of their application, although at times the difference between them is vague. An analysis of existing literature on Russian foreign policy and political warfare<sup>25</sup> helps us identify ten sometimes overlapping major areas in which actors of Putin's Russia conduct political warfare and, thus, produce malign influence. These areas are illustrated in Figure 2.

<b>POLITICS</b>	<b>DIPLOMACY</b>	<b>MILITARY DOMAIN</b>	<b>BUSINESS</b>	<b>MEDIA</b>
<b>CIVIL SOCIETY</b>	<b>ACADEMIA</b>	<b>RELIGION</b>	<b>CRIME</b>	<b>LAW</b>

Figure 2. Areas of Russian malign influence

At the same time, we identify the following tools of Russian malign influence (the list, however, is far from exhaustive):

- political alliances
- interference in elections
- agents of influence
- front organizations
- international organizations
- public relations and lobbying
- energy politics
- economic subversion and sanctions
- shell companies
- intelligence operations
- cyber warfare
- cyber crime
- lawfare, or corrupt misuse of the legal system
- public diplomacy
- think-tanks
- diaspora groups
- propaganda and disinformation
- corruption
- conditional military aid
- paramilitary groups
- organized crime
- religious politics
- historical revisionism

25 Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion*; Keir Giles et al., *The Russian Challenge* (London: Chatham House, 2015), [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field\\_document/20150605RussianChallengeGilesHansonLyneNixeySherrWoodUpdate.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150605RussianChallengeGilesHansonLyneNixeySherrWoodUpdate.pdf); Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe," *European Council on Foreign Relations* (2017), [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR228\\_-\\_CONTROLLING\\_CHAOS1.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR228_-_CONTROLLING_CHAOS1.pdf); Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND\\_RR1772.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND_RR1772.pdf); Bob Seely, "A Definition of Contemporary Russian Conflict: How Does the Kremlin Wage War?" *Henry Jackson Society* (2018), <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/A-Definition-of-Contemporary-Russian-Conflict-new-branding.pdf>; Andrei P. Tsygankov, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

Thus, techniques and combinations of techniques used by state and pro-Kremlin non-state actors in the framework of political warfare thus producing malign influence are innumerable. For example, the Kremlin may interfere in elections in Western nations by building alliances with particular political forces, providing funding through shell companies, and supporting them with the help of disinformation and cyber-attacks against their opponents. Or Russian pro-Kremlin actors may attempt to drive wedges between social and cultural groups in European nations through simulated “civil society” groups funded through organized crime. Or those actors may hack European think-tanks that aim to counter the Kremlin’s malign influence operations, and discredit them by publishing sensitive, non-public information. Or Russian intelligence services may provide training for paramilitary groups in European societies that could later be used for radicalizing peaceful democratic protests.

There are eight major categories of Russian state and non-state operators that are engaged in political warfare in Europe and thus are exercising malign influence: *siloviki* (institutions of force), official structures, political forces, business community, state-sponsored media, social media propaganda networks, think-tanks/foundations, and the traditionalist bloc. Figure 3 provides non-exhaustive examples of operators belonging to these categories.

<b>SILOVIKI</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defence Ministry, Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, Foreign Intelligence Service, Federal Security Service</li> </ul>
<b>OFFICIAL STRUCTURES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presidential Administration, Foreign Ministry, Committee on International Affairs of the State Duma</li> </ul>
<b>POLITICAL FORCES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“United Russia”, Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, Communist Party</li> </ul>
<b>BUSINESS COMMUNITY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gazprom, Rosneft</li> </ul>
<b>STATE-SPONSORED MEDIA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RT, Sputnik, Redfish</li> </ul>
<b>SOCIAL MEDIA PROPAGANDA NETWORKS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Internet Research Agency, Russian web brigades</li> </ul>
<b>THINK-TANKS/ FOUNDATIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rosstrudnichestvo, Valdai Discussion Club, Dialogue of Civilisations, Katehon</li> </ul>
<b>TRADITIONALIST BLOC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russian Orthodox Church, anti-LGBT organisations</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Russian state and non-state operators of political warfare

Although these operators of malign influence can be broken down into categories, it is important to stress that at the time of a particularly acute crisis in the relations between Putin's regime and the West, all these operators can be momentarily mobilized and function as a single unit, no matter whether they are state or non-state entities.

Russian operators of malign influence do not function in a vacuum: in the majority of cases they are linked to Western and, in particular, European *facilitators* of the Kremlin's political warfare. The concept of facilitators is close to what the authors of *The Kremlin Playbook 2* call "enablers," defined as entities (sometimes even countries) that "allow the Kremlin to achieve its end [. . .] and avoid some of the consequences of its behavior. [. . .] Crucially, by allowing Russian economic influence to cycle through their systems, enablers actively participate in the weakening and discrediting of their own democratic structures."<sup>26</sup> However, while the concept of enablers—at least as defined above—is economical in nature, facilitators operate in any area identified in Figure 2 thus helping Russian state and non-state operators (see Figure 3) achieve objectives that lead to the implementation of the Kremlin's strategic goals. Figure 4 gives examples of facilitators of pro-Kremlin malign influence in Europe.

<b>SILOVIKI</b>	■ Transnational organized crime, paramilitary groups, biker gangs
<b>OFFICIAL STRUCTURES</b>	■ Agents of influence, friendly academics, experts and journalists, celebrities, producers
<b>POLITICAL FORCES</b>	■ Friendly foreign political actors, front organizations
<b>BUSINESS COMMUNITY</b>	■ Business partners of Russian companies
<b>STATE-SPONSORED MEDIA</b>	■ Websites amplifying Russian pro-Kremlin narratives
<b>SOCIAL MEDIA PROPAGANDA NETWORKS</b>	■ Far-right and conspiracy theory Internet activists
<b>THINK-TANKS/ FOUNDATIONS</b>	■ Friendly academics, experts and journalists
<b>TRADITIONALIST BLOC</b>	■ National Orthodox churches, ultraconservative and anti-LGBT organisations

Figure 4. Facilitators of the Kremlin's political warfare in Europe

26 Heather A. Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook 2: The Enablers* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019): 12 (the original emphasis omitted).

## INVESTIGATING RUSSIAN MALIGN INFLUENCE

When investigating Russian malign influence, one needs, first of all, to establish the context. Malign influence emerges during a crisis between nations, which is perceived to move them into a situation inconsistent with peacetime relations when they would try to change other nations' behavior or opinions by employing engagement or shaping strategies, rather than disruptive or destructive ones. In other words, malign influence is a product of the grey area of political warfare and cannot emerge during peacetime (see Figure 1).

Understanding the context of malign influence is helpful to understand why the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors are strategically engaged in political warfare against the West in general and Europe in particular. These actors seek to minimize Western influences perceived as threats to Putin's regime and, at the same time, to advance various interests of the regime in the Western environment considered as unfavorable due to a crisis in relations between Putin's Russia and the West.

It is also important to assess vulnerabilities of European states because the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors are most likely to exploit those. Major vulnerabilities to Russian malign influence are shown in Figure 5.

<b>CORRUPTION</b>	■ Pro-Kremlin actors use corruption as a lubricant for malign influence operations
<b>ANTI-SYSTEM PARTIES</b>	■ Anti-system parties, whether of far-right or far-left conviction, amplify societal divisions and make societies more vulnerable
<b>ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE</b>	■ A country's economic dependence on Russia is yet another lubricant for malign influence operations
<b>SOCIAL INEQUALITY</b>	■ High levels of social inequality make European societies more vulnerable.
<b>HISTORICAL LINKS</b>	■ Religious and cultural connections to Russia may make countries less resilient to pro-Kremlin propaganda.
<b>WEAK DEMOCRACY</b>	■ Weak or defective democratic institutions facilitate Russian malign influence operations
<b>WEAK MEDIA</b>	■ Weak independent media imply weak social control over state officials and a distorted picture of developments in a country

Figure 5. Major vulnerabilities to Russian malign influence

Next, we need to identify the operators of malign influence, i.e. Russian state and non-state pro-Kremlin actors, that are engaged in political warfare in Europe

and thus produce malign influence (Figure 3). Furthermore, with regard to operators, we also need to identify the area(s) of their operation (Figure 2), the tools these operators use, and whether they also use any facilitators in Europe (Figure 4).

After identifying operators, their tools and, possibly, their facilitators, as well as establishing the areas affected, we need to consider whether the malign influence operations helped the Kremlin achieve any tactical objectives that help the Kremlin achieve its strategic goals.

Finally, we need to discuss how the existing malign influence subverts European values and/or democratic institutions—it is this very effect that determines the malign nature of the influence operations of Putin's Russia. Figure 6 sums up the process of investigating Russian malign influence described above.

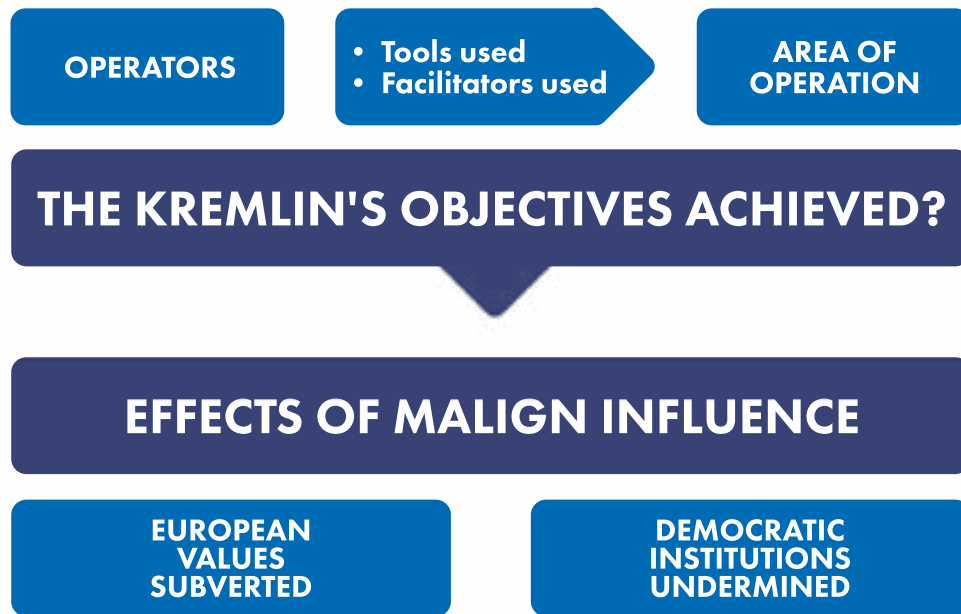


Figure 6. Malign influence as a product of political warfare



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**The work of Free Russia Foundation is focused in three key mission areas:**

1. Advancing the vision of a democratic, prosperous and peaceful Russia governed by the rule of law by educating the next generation of Russian leaders committed to these ideals;
2. Strengthening civil society in Russia and defending human rights activists persecuted by the Russian government; and
3. Supporting formulation of an effective and sustainable Russia policy in the United States and Europe by educating policy makers and informing public debate.

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