

Networks of fake news

The role of AI in Russia's disinformation campaigns vis-à-vis the Russian war in Ukraine

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Networks of fake news: The role of AI in Russia's disinformation campaigns vis-à-vis the Russian war in Ukraine¹

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Abstract

The Russian Federation is unable to secure a complete and rapid defeat of Ukraine on the battlefield and therefore seeks to persuade Kyiv and its Western partners to accept an unjust peace. From the very outbreak of Russia's conflict against Ukraine, following the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests, Moscow launched a hybrid influence campaign targeting European and Euro-Atlantic states, aimed at undermining governmental institutions, increasing societal polarisation, and eroding public trust in national authorities. Regarding Russia's influence campaign in recent years, their objectives are closely linked to the war of aggression against Ukraine. The primary objective pursued by the Russian Federation is to shape public opinion on the Russo-Ukrainian war – an attempt to reduce public support for providing assistance to Ukraine's defence. Moreover, Moscow has integrated new tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) into its disinformation campaigns, using AI to generate texts, images, and video content, as well as to rapidly disseminate disinformation across social media platforms. Thus, Russian disinformation campaigns do not directly affect military operations in Ukraine, but they play an indirect role by seeking to reduce the amount of security and humanitarian assistance to Kyiv, weakening Ukraine's defensive capabilities.

Keywords: Russia, disinformation, Europe, Ukraine, AI.

¹ This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two years, Russian disinformation campaigns have increasingly come to the forefront, relying on artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools to weaken European cohesion regarding Ukraine, reduce support for Ukraine's defence efforts, and promote false or distorted narratives about the Russo-Ukrainian war.

The primary objective pursued by the Russian Federation is to influence public opinion on the Russo-Ukrainian war – an attempt to decrease public support for providing assistance to Ukraine's defence. These campaigns recurrently invoke Europe's economic situation, inflation, rising energy and utility prices, as well as the "inevitability of a Russian victory", the exacerbation of corruption in Ukraine, or Russian victories on the battlefield. These influence campaigns may also promote specific political figures or parties that advocate limiting or halting support for Ukraine, as well as easing the sanctions imposed on Russia.

Russia has integrated recent years' emerging technologies into its hybrid influence efforts, and more specifically into disinformation campaigns targeting European states and the broader Western community. Moving beyond the use of state-controlled media channels and platforms (e.g., Sputnik, Russia Today), Russia has increasingly relied on artificial intelligence and exploiting the algorithms underpinning social media platforms. The aim is to expand the capacity for mass production of disinformation materials and their rapid, or even automated, generation (images, texts, videos), enable swift translations to disseminate pro-Russian narratives across a wide range of countries, and deploy so-called AI-assisted "bot farms" to spread content at scale through networks of fake or cloned websites, inauthentic accounts and online groups, and the manipulation of social media algorithms. The political and strategic objective of the Russian Federation is to polarize European societies and to legitimize and promote pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, the main objective is to persuade European publics to accept, or even actively promote, efforts to make concessions to Moscow and to call for a rapid but unjust peace for Kyiv.



RECENT CAMPAIGNS

In recent months, Russian disinformation campaigns have focused on the use of fake news websites and the dissemination of AI-generated videos aimed at demoralizing the Ukrainian population. Kyiv has accused Moscow of using TikTok to conduct disinformation campaigns designed to undermine Ukrainian morale and weaken resistance to the Russian invasion (Dixon & Beznosiuk 2025). Moreover, Russia has begun employing AI tools to generate videos featuring “ordinary citizens” from Ukraine who convey pessimistic messages about the war. In one of the most recent disinformation campaigns related to the Russo-Ukrainian war, social media platforms have been flooded with AI-generated videos depicting young “Ukrainian soldiers” who claim they are being “forcibly” sent to fight and who describe a devastating situation on the front lines (Zadorozhnyy 2025). These artificial videos are disseminated on major platforms such as TikTok and X, with some reaching millions of views.

The campaign targets both domestic audiences in Ukraine – with the aim of inducing panic, weakening internal cohesion, and eroding trust in Ukrainian leadership – and international audiences, with the aim of reducing Western support, undermining confidence in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and portraying the war as an act of personal ambition on the part of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Furthermore, while most of the videos appear in Ukrainian, versions in Russian and English are also circulated, depending on the intended target audience (Zadorozhnyy 2025).

THE ROLE OF AI. BACKGROUND

Russia has a long-standing track record of conducting disinformation and influence campaigns across Euro-Atlantic states, with notable examples ranging from elections in Ukraine (2014), the United States (2016), and France (2017 – *MacronLeaks*), to more recent efforts to influence and undermine elections in the Republic of Moldova and Romania (2024-2025). Prior to the emergence of AI-based technologies, the primary dissemination channels for disinformation campaigns consisted of state-controlled media platforms such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, “troll farms”, and individuals paid for creating and spreading online content.

A 2025 report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) found that Russian state-affiliated disinformation actors had already made significant investments in AI technologies to influence European audiences as early as the previous year (Walner et al. 2025). Russia employs generative AI software to create fake news articles and social media posts, fabricated images and videos, as well as to automate the dissemination of false content on social platforms through AI-assisted bots and inauthentic accounts (Walner et al. 2025). **AI tools enable a rapid, low-cost, and large-scale production of credible looking text, images, and video content.** Moreover, they allow for the tailoring of Russian narratives to specific social groups and diverse populations, as well as their promotion across multiple languages and social media platforms.

Some of the most notable Russian disinformation campaigns targeting European states in recent years include Doppelgänger, Matryoshka, Storm-1516, and Portal Kombat – all of which have been attributed to Moscow by the European Union (Boutemour et al. 2025). The Doppelgänger campaign targeted citizens in France, Germany, and Poland, with the objective of fostering anti-EU sentiment in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. The campaign involved the creation of fake websites mimicking government portals and Western media outlets, which disseminated false news through extensive networks designed to manipulate social media algorithms and run paid advertisements on Meta platforms (ENISA 2025). In another example, Russia created the *Pravda* network – a series of fake portals that repurpose and repackage pro-Russian narratives originating from Russian social media channels and official websites, adapting them to different target audiences (Châtelet 2025).

At the same time, **Russia has also undertaken efforts to, arguably successfully, exploit the algorithms underpinning major social media platforms.** A large-scale investigation conducted by several independent EU media outlets revealed in 2024 that TikTok and its recommendation algorithm had been exploited by the Russian Federation in disinformation campaigns across multiple European countries, including Romania, Estonia, Germany, and Slovakia (Context 2024). Beyond using AI tools to generate false content, Russia has also sought to manipulate Wikipedia articles so that AI platforms (such as ChatGPT) would directly generate pro-Russian narratives in specific contexts (Châtelet 2025).



EFFECTS ON THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

The Russian Federation's information campaigns have primarily targeted Ukraine, EU and NATO member states, as well as countries in the so-called "Global South", with the aim of legitimising the illegal invasion of Ukraine and undermining Ukrainian resistance to Russia's war of aggression. A 2025 report by the European External Action Service (EEAS) states that Ukraine has remained the primary target of Russian information operations. According to EEAS, Russia's core objectives are to weaken Kyiv's ability to defend itself against the invasion and to erode Western support for Ukraine by shaping global perceptions of the war in favour of Kremlin narratives.

Nevertheless, the Eurobarometer survey conducted in the first part of 2025 indicates that Europeans continue to hold generally favourable views toward Ukraine, with more than half supporting the current provision of assistance to Ukraine (including military aid), as well as the imposition of sanctions on Russia (Eurobarometer 2025). At the same time, however, **the proportion of respondents who support the further continuation of assistance to Ukraine is declining.** Similarly, a 2024 survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) showed a decrease in the share of Europeans who favour continued support for Ukraine aimed at liberating territories occupied by Russia, alongside a growing number of respondents who support the idea that Europe should pressure Kyiv to negotiate a peace agreement with Russia (Krastev & Leonard 2024). A notable finding highlighted by the Eurobarometer is that **the steepest decline in support for assistance to Ukraine came from respondents who reported that their economic situation was unfavourable or had worsened in recent years** (Consolini 2025).

This trend toward supporting a ceasefire and negotiations for a peace agreement or armistice is also present within the Ukrainian society, albeit with important nuances. A Gallup poll published in August 2025 showed that 69% of Ukrainians preferred a negotiated end to the war, while only 24% favoured continuing military operations until victory – reversing the proportions observed in 2022 (Viggers 2025). However, a poll conducted in the same period by Rating Group for the Ukrainian media found that **75% of Ukrainians supported a negotiated armistice only if the country received strong security guarantees** (Pakhnyuk 2025).



Thus, while the war is not directly affected on the battlefield, Ukraine's capacity to defend itself may be weakened if the level of assistance provided by Western states declines. Surveys conducted over the past two years suggest that Europeans remain broadly open to continuing support for Ukraine, yet there is a growing sentiment in favour of pressuring Kyiv to accept significant concessions to Russia. Still, it remains unclear to what extent this trend can be attributed to Russian influence campaigns. A 2024 *Foreign Affairs* article argued that governments should not underestimate the role played by influence operations, but also avoid exaggerating their impact – an approach that ultimately benefits the very states that employ such tools (Belogolova et al. 2024). It is highly likely that other factors, such as economic conditions and domestic developments within EU member states, play a more significant role than Russian influence campaigns, but these campaigns do succeed in amplifying pre-existing societal sentiments and legitimising certain viewpoints.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia is unable to secure a decisive and rapid victory against Ukraine on the battlefield and therefore seeks a favourable ceasefire agreement, which could be achieved if Moscow succeeds in eroding Western unity and reducing support for Kyiv. **Russian disinformation campaigns do not directly affect military operations in Ukraine, but they play an indirect role by attempting to lower levels of security and humanitarian assistance to Kyiv, thereby weakening Ukraine's defensive capabilities.**

Thus, the European Union and its member states should continue their efforts to **publicly attribute** Russian disinformation campaigns, placing particular emphasis on naming responsible actors and exposing the methods employed. These attribution efforts should be complemented by the continued use of **sanctions** against individuals and entities found to be responsible. Over the past two years, the EU has imposed and extended sanctions on several Russian individuals and entities involved in destabilising activities and disinformation campaigns targeting EU member states and partner countries (Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine 2025). At the same time, European states should seek to **disrupt the networks used** by Kremlin-linked actors to conduct influence operations. For example, in 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice seized multiple internet domains and several hundred social media accounts that were allegedly used by Russia for AI-generated disinformation

campaigns (Johnson 2024). In addition, European states should further **strengthen cooperation** in countering disinformation and **integrate lessons learned from past events**, particularly drawing on the expertise of countries with extensive exposure to Russian influence operations, such as Estonia, Latvia, or Ukraine (Vroblevska & Irdi 2025; Beznosiuk 2025).

Furthermore, European states should cooperate closely with **companies that control major social media platforms** (Meta, TikTok, X, etc.) in order to improve efforts to moderate and remove content associated with disinformation campaigns. Additionally, another important element, beyond debunking and pre-bunking false narratives, is **working on improving economic conditions**, especially for the most vulnerable socio-economic groups, and by **openly communicating** the importance of security and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine.

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