



## INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 524

June 7, 2022

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### **Russia's War in Ukraine and Implications for Its Influence Operations in the West**

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and its subsequent atrocities on Ukrainian territory have affected Moscow's ability to successfully conduct influence operations in the West, but whether this will continue remains to be seen. Russia's aggression made the execution of its influence operations more difficult, but the Kremlin will try to utilize the Ukrainian migration wave to other countries to stir discontent and plant divisive false narratives within western societies.

### **Russia's War in Ukraine Makes Russia's Influence Operations in the West More Difficult to Execute**

Following Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the European Union (EU) banned RT (formerly known as Russia Today) and Sputnik on the 27 countries' territory. These so called news organizations, directly connected to the Russian government, were spreading "systematic information manipulation and disinformation" and their disinformation narratives were considered "a significant and direct threat to the [European] Union's public order and security."<sup>1</sup> Amid streaming platforms' and technological companies' efforts to comply with the EU's ban by demonetizing and deplatforming<sup>2</sup> RT's and Sputnik's content, RT America laid off all of its staff and effectively shut down in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The Russian Federation used these channels to legitimize false narratives, disseminate fake news, and pollute the information environment in other countries.



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On its own, shutting these outlets down will perhaps not make a significant difference in Russia's ability to plant false narratives because there are too many others performing the same function. But countries have been taking additional steps to shut down comparable entities on their respective territories, such as websites involved in spreading Russia-linked disinformation. For example, the Czech Republic shut down more than 18 disinformation websites in the weeks following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> Other countries took similar measures. But banned websites can (and often do) migrate to hosts not subjected to a ban and may eventually reconstitute their readership, making the effect temporary unless further actions are taken. Such is the nature of the contemporary information environment.<sup>5</sup> It certainly does not mean democracies should completely cede the ground to Russia's disinformation outlets. Delegitimizing disinformation content and exposing links to the Russian government is one of the best ways to counter Russia's propaganda.

Russia's war in Ukraine made disinformation relatively easier to spot—content related to denying Russia's war crimes in places like Irpin or Bucha (or blaming them on Ukraine), claiming Russia's false flag attacks and operations are Ukrainian operations, or spreading lies about the United States having a covert biological weapons program in Ukraine, are solid signs that Russia or pro-Russian elements are most likely behind it. Shutting down platforms spreading these narratives takes away one of the disinformation sources, even if temporarily.

Following Russia's invasion, EU countries expelled more than 200 Russian accredited diplomats.<sup>6</sup> More than 400 diplomats were expelled from over 20 countries worldwide in what is reported to be one of the largest expulsion of diplomats in modern history.<sup>7</sup> What do diplomats have to do with Russia's ability to spread false information and conduct influence operations? A relatively large number of Russia's diplomats are intelligence officers pretending to be diplomats and enjoying diplomatic immunity. Their jobs in host countries can include identifying and making contacts with people who could be turned to work for the Russian Federation, generating compromising material on host countries' political and business figures for a potential blackmail use later, and maintaining networks of willing collaborators. "Russia uses diplomacy not to remain in contact with partners, but to push false claims and false propaganda statements against the west," according to Stanisław Żaryn, spokesperson of the Minister-Special Services Coordinator and head of the National Security Department in the Chancellery of Poland's Prime Minister.<sup>8</sup>

Utilizing these resources contributes to the Russian Federation's capacity to execute influence operations and, therefore, not having this resource available will inevitably hinder its ability to do so. Anecdotally, the Czech Republic saw a temporary decrease in pro-Russian internet trolling activities after it expelled 18 Russian intelligence officers posing as diplomats in April 2021.<sup>9</sup> The trolling resumed after about 6 weeks, presumably after the expelled Russians got their new assignments. The Czech Republic then established a strict parity rule, equalizing the number of Russian diplomats in Prague and Czech diplomats in Moscow and significantly



limiting Moscow's diplomatic presence in the country. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Czech Republic imposed further restrictions on Russia's diplomatic presence.<sup>10</sup>

### **Domestic Implications for Russia**

In retaliation for other countries' steps to make Russia's disinformation and influence operations more difficult, the Russian government blocked access to several foreign news organizations' websites and then passed censorship laws effectively prohibiting independent journalism about Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> These measures came on the heels of years of increasing restrictions on the operation and funding of foreign news outlets and non-profits in Russia. Several news organizations suspended their coverage for fear of exposing their employees to punishment under the new law; others like Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow) shut down altogether.<sup>12</sup> Russia completely banned Twitter and Facebook.<sup>13</sup>

These steps will make it yet harder for independent journalists to penetrate the Russian information sphere and provide Russians with information that is not censored and state-approved. Work-arounds are possible, but unlikely to be utilized by a majority of Russia's population that still predominantly relies on the government-run media for its primary information source.<sup>14</sup> Even if Russians had diverse sources of information about the war at their disposal, they may still opt for government-sponsored disinformation.<sup>15</sup> The majority of Russians appear to support Putin's war in Ukraine (which must be called a "special operation" in Russia), including in regions that bear a majority of casualties.<sup>16</sup> The Putin regime will continue to promulgate false narratives at home to solidify support and pre-empt questions related to the government's poor handling of the war.

### **Potential for Russia to Exploit New Narratives**

Despite some setbacks, Russia's influence operations will continue in the future.<sup>17</sup> If anything, Russia may utilize them more than ever given that they are a tool of choice vis-à-vis stronger opponents and Russia's war in Ukraine is weakening Russia in the short- and long-run. So far, Russia's success has been limited to non-western audiences and those pre-disposed to believe Russia.<sup>18</sup>

Russia's unprovoked war has caused over 6 million people to flee Ukraine, mainly to Poland but also to other countries.<sup>19</sup> To address the influx of refugees and prevent a large-scale humanitarian crisis, host governments have activated a set of measures making it easier for Ukrainians to obtain residence and work permits, utilize health and social security services, participate in language courses, and for children to attend schools. These measures have been funded from national and European Union budgets. Private entities contribute to these efforts, e.g., by providing free meals. These measures are causing resentment among a small part of the host population, which could be fertile ground for Russian influence operations and



disinformation, particularly if solidarity with Ukraine diminishes over time. Narratives about the Ukrainians unjustly “taking advantage” and abusing other people’s generosity are already circulating within the information sphere, although they are not widely shared.

Next, Russia has reportedly been forcibly removing Ukrainians to Russia.<sup>20</sup> Ukrainians are forced through “filtration camps” and sometimes have their passports stolen.<sup>21</sup> With no documentation and means, this population could be vulnerable to exploitation by the Russians, including for example using these Ukrainians to generate propaganda videos on alleged Ukrainian soldiers’ atrocities or on how well the Ukrainians are treated in Russia, for either foreign or domestic consumption.<sup>22</sup>

Russia makes great efforts to deny its war crimes and portrays them as the actions of Ukrainians. These efforts have limited success in countries with open access to information; Russia’s culpability is undeniable.<sup>23</sup> Russia’s more successful narratives falsely involve allegations that the United States maintains biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine and that Russia was provoked to attack Ukraine because of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s enlargement into Russia’s Cold War sphere of influence.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Russian influence operations appear to be hampered by the consequences of its war in Ukraine, but the United States and its allies should not take this situation for granted.<sup>25</sup> Russia’s influence operations online are slowly creeping back to their pre-war levels, which is why the United States and allies must continue to be vigilant in light of Russia’s continued activities.

<sup>1</sup> Foo Yun Chee, “EU bans RT, Sputnik over Ukraine disinformation,” *Reuters*, March 2, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-bans-rt-sputnik-banned-over-ukraine-disinformation-2022-03-02/>.

<sup>2</sup> Demonetizing means prohibiting financial gains from advertisement, deplatforming means removing and banning a registered user from a mass communication medium (such as a social networking or blogging website). See “Deplatform,” Merriam-Webster, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deplatform>.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Darcy, “RT America ceases productions and lays off most of its staff,” *CNN News*, March 4, 2022, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/03/media/rt-america-layoffs/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Lukáš Václavík, “Čeští dezinformátoři se opět nadechnou. I přes zablokování se pomalu vracejí na původní návštěvnost (Czech propagators of disinformation are breathing again. Despite the blocks, they are getting back to the pre-invasion levels of exposure),” *Zive*, May 12, 2022, available at <https://www.zive.cz/clanky/blokovani-ceskym-dezinformatorum-ublizilo-nekteri-vsak-paradoxne-posilili-ukazuje-analyza/sc-3-a-215992/default.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.





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<sup>6</sup> “EU allies expel more than 200 Russian diplomats and staff amid outrage over Bucha killings,” *France24*, May 4, 2022, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220405-eu-allies-expel-more-russian-diplomats-amid-outrage-over-bucha-killings>.

<sup>7</sup> Hiroshi Asahina, “400-plus Russian diplomats expelled worldwide over Ukraine,” *Nikkei Asia*, April 15, 2022, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-war/400-plus-Russian-diplomats-expelled-worldwide-over-Ukraine>; and Robbie Gramer and Mary Yang, “West Boots Out Hundreds of Russian Diplomats in Wake of Ukraine Invasion and War Crimes,” *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2022, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/us-europe-russian-diplomats-ukraine/>.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Wintour, “Spy games: expulsion of diplomats shines light on Russian espionage,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/15/spy-russian-diplomats-europe-espionage-ukraine>.

<sup>9</sup> Jakub Štos and Radka Wallerová, “Trollí farma přímo na ruské ambasádě? Poznatky BIS po vyhoštění špionů (A Troll Farm on the Russian Embassy? What Does the Czech Security and Information Service Know after the Expulsion of Russia’s Spies),” *Seznam*, June 28, 2021, available at <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/trolli-farma-primo-na-ruske-ambasade-poznatky-bis-po-vyhosteni-spionu-168360>.

<sup>10</sup> “Ruští diplomaté v Evropě si balí kufry. Také Česko vyhostilo zástupce velvyslance (Russian Diplomats in Europe Are Sent Packing. The Czech Republic Expelled Ambassador’s Deputy too),” *Hospodářské Noviny* (Economic Newspaper), March 29, 2022, available at <https://domaci.hn.cz/c1-67051110-rusti-diplomate-v-evrope-si-bali-kufry-take-cesko-vyhostilo-zastupce-velvyslance>.

<sup>11</sup> “Russia blocks access to BBC and Voice of America websites,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/russia-restricts-access-bbc-russian-service-radio-liberty-ria-2022-03-04/>.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Grynbaum, John Koblin and Tiffany Hsu, “Several Western news organizations suspend operations in Russia,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/business/western-media-operations-russia.html>; and Sophia Sandurskaya, “Russian Liberal Radio Mainstay Ekho Moskvy Closes After Pulled Off Air,” *The Moscow Times*, March 3, 2022, available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/03/russian-liberal-radio-mainstay-ekho-moskvy-closes-after-pulled-off-the-air-a76730>.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Milmo, “Russia blocks access to Facebook and Twitter,” *The Guardian*, March 4, 2022, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russia-completely-blocks-access-to-facebook-and-twitter>.

<sup>14</sup> Yasmeen Serhan, “How Western News Is Getting Around Putin’s Digital Iron Curtain,” *The Atlantic*, March 22, 2022, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/03/international-news-russia-kremlin-media-censorship/627120/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kseniya Kirillova, “Why Russians Swallow Propaganda,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, April 21, 2022, available at <https://cepa.org/why-russians-swallow-propaganda/>.

<sup>16</sup> Mike Eckel, “Polls Show Russians Support Putin And The War On Ukraine. Really?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 7, 2022, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-support-ukraine-war-polls-putin/31791423.html>; and Shura Burtin, “Feeling around for something human Why do Russians support the war against Ukraine?” *Meduza*, May 3, 2022, available at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/05/03/feeling-around-for-something-human>.

<sup>17</sup> Cindy Otis, “Russia is turning to its old disinformation playbook in Ukraine. Is the world able to stop it?” *USA Today*, March 7, 2022, available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2022/03/07/russia-disinformation-ukraine-cyber-warfare/9402421002/>.



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<sup>18</sup> “Russia is swaying Twitter users outside the West to its side,” *The Economist*, May 14, 2022, available at <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/05/14/russia-is-swaying-twitter-users-outside-the-west-to-its-side>.

<sup>19</sup> “UNHCR Says 6 Million Ukrainian Refugees So Far From Russian Invasion,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 13, 2022, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-6-million-refugees-unhcr/31847527.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Laurence Peter, “Russia transfers thousands of Mariupol civilians to its territory,” *BBC News*, 27 March 2022, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60894142>.

<sup>21</sup> Gleb Golod, “‘I’ve never been so scared’ Ukrainian refugees give firsthand accounts of ‘filtration camps’ run by Russian troops,” *Meduza*, May 12, 2022, available at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/05/13/i-ve-never-been-so-scared>.

<sup>22</sup> This would not be that different from the Russians extracting concessions from Ukrainian prisoners of war under duress.

<sup>23</sup> See for example “Ukraine: Russian forces extrajudicially executing civilians in apparent war crimes – new testimony,” *Amnesty International*, April 7, 2022, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/04/ukraine-russian-forces-extrajudicially-executing-civilians-in-apparent-war-crimes-new-testimony/>; or Malachy Browne, David Botti and Haley Willis, “Satellite images show bodies lay in Bucha for weeks, despite Russian claims,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/04/world/europe/bucha-ukraine-bodies.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Jeff Seldin, “US Sees No Letup in Russian Influence Operations,” *VOA News*, March 18, 2022, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-sees-no-letup-in-russian-influence-operations/6490690.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Jeff Seldin, “Russia’s Vaunted Influence Operations Boggled Down with Ukraine,” *VOA News*, March 7, 2022, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-s-vaunted-influence-operations-bogged-down-with-ukraine/6473771.html>.

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