

Analysis

How Does the Global South Perceive Poland?

Part 1: Russian Disinformation in the MENAT Region

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About the project



Instytut Badań
nad Turcją



Disinformation
in MENAT



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Introduction

Modern armed conflicts and political rivalry increasingly shift into the informational sphere. Russia has demonstrated particular proficiency in information warfare, which includes disseminating disinformation aimed at undermining the credibility of Western institutions and states. This strategy is considered a form of "sharp power," wherein influence is exerted through cultural appeal and manipulative information tactics designed to achieve political advantage. This strategy is executed through various platforms and media channels that are pivotal in spreading pro-Russian messages and crafting anti-Western narratives. One critical area where Russia intensifies its disinformation efforts is the MENAT region (Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey). Regional tensions and armed conflicts create a fertile ground for Russian narratives. The widespread availability of the internet and social media enables the unprecedented scale of disinformation campaigns. Russian government agencies and state-controlled NGOs invest in diverse platforms, social media channels, news portals, and fake websites to penetrate public awareness effectively and promote Kremlin-aligned messaging.

This analysis aims to identify and present the methods and tools Russia employs in the MENAT region to propagate pro-Russian narratives and disinformation. It seeks to illustrate the breadth of platforms and channels Russia uses to influence public opinion, potentially affecting perceptions of international conflicts and reshaping views of specific countries, including Poland. The analysis should help to understand the scale and complexity of Russia's informational strategy and can help identify and counteract pro-Russian actions.

The study involved a detailed examination of information channels, social media platforms, and other tools Russia employs to disseminate its narratives. The analysis draws on available data from international disinformation reports, online research, and regional media studies. It focuses on identifying significant platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), and Telegram, as well as the role of traditional media and news portals that, under the guise of independent sources, propagate Kremlin-aligned narratives. Additionally, it identifies and presents less apparent channels such as partner media in the MENAT region, cloned websites, networks of fake accounts, and influencers used by Russia.

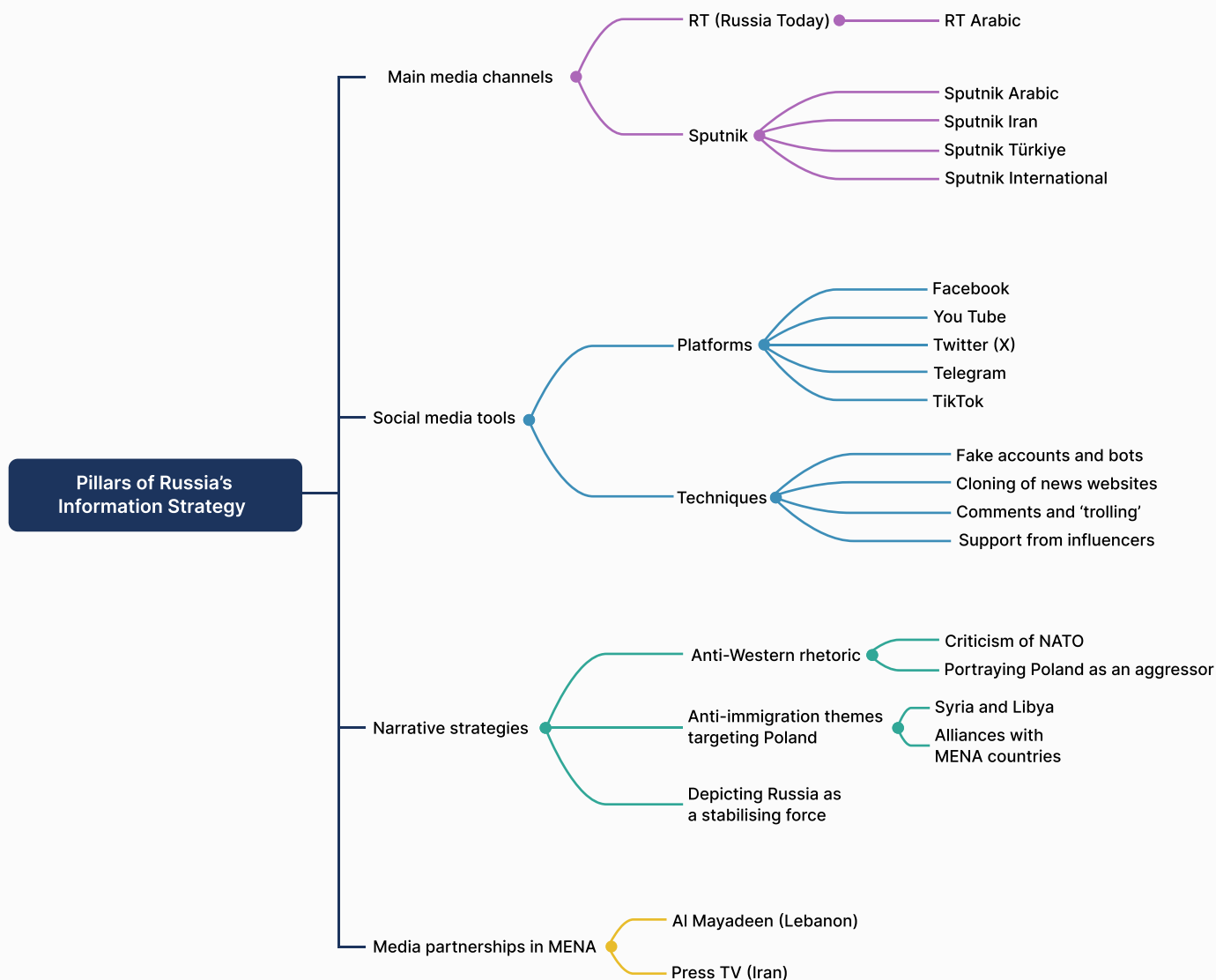


Figure 1: Pillars of Russian Informational Strategy
Source: Opracowanie własne

Figure 1 illustrates the scope of informational activities conducted by Russia through channels and platforms that are pivotal to supporting the Kremlin's strategy. Each platform contributes to amplifying pro-Russian narratives, often through information manipulation, evoking emotions, and highlighting polarizing topics that weaken Western influence in the region.

Social media platforms like **Facebook** and **X** provide an ideal space for conducting large-scale informational campaigns. The Russian Federation relies heavily on fake accounts and bots to amplify pro-Russian messages and manipulate discourse around armed conflicts and international politics. For example, anti-NATO content and messages portraying Poland in a negative light are promoted as part of a long-term strategy to undermine stability in the region.

With its ability to publish emotionally engaging videos, **YouTube** reaches audiences with varying levels of knowledge about international relations. Channels such as *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic* target Arab-speaking audiences, presenting a positive image of Russia and a negative portrayal of the West. **Telegram**, a popular platform in MENAT countries, enables the anonymous dissemination of information that significantly influences public opinion. Short, dynamic, and often manipulative content targets younger audiences on **TikTok**. Such materials are typically emotionally charged, aiming to create negative associations with NATO or Poland, often depicting it as an aggressor in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.

Another pillar of Russia's disinformation strategy includes news portals and blogs publishing ostensibly independent analyses of international politics. Examples include *Strategic Culture Foundation*, *SouthFront*, *InfoRos*, and *NewsFront*, which portray Russia as a stabilizing force in conflicts in Syria or Libya while presenting the West as a destabilizing factor. These platforms project a veneer of independence and reference "experts" from other pro-Russian media, increasing the reach of their narratives. Russia also uses "mirror websites," which mimic the appearance of Western news portals like *The Guardian* or *BBC*. These sites publish manipulated articles that resemble originals, enhancing their credibility and subtly spreading disinformation. Internet forums and comment sections on popular news outlets also serve as spaces where pro-Russian trolls post provocative and emotionally charged content, depicting NATO and Poland negatively. Such comments escalate negative sentiments and spread disinformation, especially on sites focused on international security.

Russia collaborates actively with media outlets in the MENAT region, willing to broadcast content favourable to its foreign policy because they share similar political profiles. Examples include Lebanon's *Al Mayadeen* (supporting Hezbollah and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government¹) and Iran's *Press TV* (a state-run English-language channel often critical of NATO and supportive of Russia). These outlets amplify pro-Russian and anti-Western content aimed at Middle Eastern audiences. By leveraging local media, Russia enhances its credibility and influence in the region, a crucial element of its informational strategy. Moreover, Moscow frequently works with individual influencers and pseudo-experts who subtly promote pro-Russian narratives on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. By collaborating with influential figures, Russia effectively reaches a broad audience, and the subtlety of the message makes it more digestible and more challenging to identify as disinformation.

In summary, the presented analysis of Russian disinformation in the MENAT region, focusing on the portrayal of Poland, highlights the extensive and intricate system of

¹ The text was written before Assad's overthrow in December 2024.

disinformation dissemination. Russia employs various platforms to tailor its messages to specific audience groups, achieving high efficacy in promoting pro-Russian narratives in North Africa and the Middle East.

Chapter 1.

Theoretical Background

In studies of disinformation, informational manipulation, and propaganda, key theories in political science provide a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding these phenomena and their impacts on political and social stability. A foundational premise for analysis is that disinformation is not merely the result of individual or fringe group activities but is an integral part of communication strategies employed by states and other powerful actors. In this context, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda theory, presented in *Manufacturing Consent*², is a fundamental approach to analyzing contemporary disinformation processes. Herman and Chomsky argue that mass media in capitalist societies do not operate as impartial sources of information but as tools that systematically support the interests of economic and political elites. This dependence significantly shapes media messaging and how specific topics are addressed or avoided. The propaganda model proposed by Herman and Chomsky is based on five key "filters"—mechanisms through which information passes before reaching the end consumer (Figure 2).

These filters ensure the selection and transformation of content to align with the interests of dominant groups. The first filter, **ownership of media**, relates to the fact that large conglomerates and corporations dominate media entities, naturally aligning their interests with those of owners and sponsors. The second filter is **advertising**, the primary source of media funding, which limits the ability of media outlets to tackle critical issues that might deter sponsors. The third filter involves the **sources of information**, predominantly government and corporate institutions.

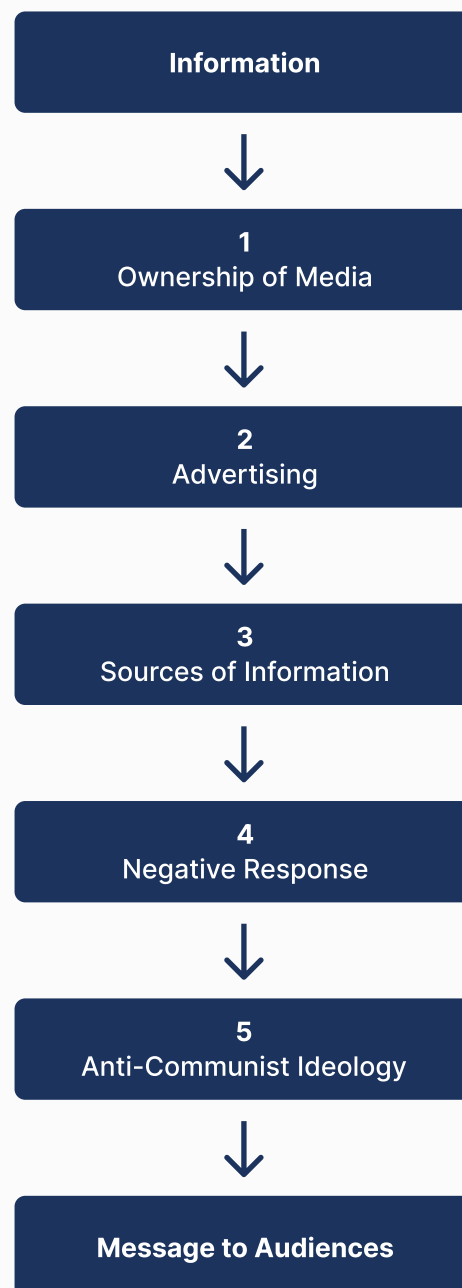


Figure 2: Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model.
Source: Own Study.

² E. S. Herman, Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Nowy Jork 1988.

Due to limited resources and the fast pace of news production, the media rely on information from credible and accessible sources, allowing dominant political and economic actors to influence narratives significantly. The fourth filter, labelled **negative response**, refers to pressure mechanisms, such as boycotts or negative campaigns targeting media that attempt to cover topics uncomfortable for elites. The final filter identified by the researchers is **anti-communist ideology**, which, they argue, further restricts critical discourse and reinforces biases. Contemporary researchers like Bennett and Livingston³ explore how Herman and Chomsky's model applies to the context of new media, which have entirely transformed the dynamics of information flow.

In the era of social media, traditional content control structures are less apparent. However, disinformation has taken on a new, massive scale, and the filtration process has undergone a complex transformation. Information flow is now driven by algorithms that amplify emotionally engaging content—often at the expense of accuracy and truth. Social media also enables the creation and dissemination of disinformation directly by individual and organizational actors, significantly increasing its reach. The algorithms of social media platforms are designed to maximize user engagement, promoting more polarizing and emotionally charged content.

Manuel Castells, in his analyses of the network society, published in *The Network Society*⁴, highlights the critical importance of controlling the flow of information as a key tool of power in the era of globalisation. According to Castells, in the age of digitalisation and widespread internet access, the flow of information, communication structures, and the capacity to manipulate data and media narratives have acquired unprecedented significance. Power and influence in the network society are decentralised and dispersed yet simultaneously concentrated around dominant networks and communication platforms, which have become key players in the political and economic spheres. Castells identifies three main characteristics of the network society: the omnipresence of information, decentralisation, and global interconnectedness. These features enable even individual actors or small groups to influence mass narratives through networks significantly. In this framework, states and powerful private entities, such as global corporations and technology platforms, strive to take control of information flows to advance their interests. Control over information allows them to shape public opinion and construct narratives that impact politics, the economy, and social perceptions while also helping to establish hegemonic positions on the international stage.

It is worth noting that political actors, including governments and interest groups, use

³ W. L. Bennett, S. Livingston, *The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions*, "European Journal of Communication", No. (2)33/2018, p. 122–139.

⁴ M. Castells, *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective*, Cheltenham 2004.

advanced technologies such as big data analytics, artificial intelligence algorithms, and social media to maximize the reach and effectiveness of their messaging. By leveraging these tools, they can target specific audiences more precisely, manipulate emotions, provoke controversies, and deepen societal divisions.

The algorithms that govern content distribution on social media further contribute to polarisation by promoting emotionally engaging content that elicits extreme reactions. This approach helps keep users within specific "information bubbles"⁵, isolating them from opposing viewpoints, exacerbating social tensions, enabling manipulation, and strengthening the spread of disinformation. However, the creation of these information bubbles is not solely the result of algorithms but can also be linked to official narratives promoted by traditional media outlets. For instance, Al Jazeera promotes the Qatari government's perspective, the Arabic-language Al Alam is part of Iran's state television network, and Al Arabiya, sponsored by the Saudi Arabian government, is often considered the "crown jewel" of the country's media empire⁶. Similarly, Turkey has joined this media competition for influence in the region, with its state broadcaster TRT launching an Arabic-language channel in 2010. Each of these media outlets crafts narratives aligned with the interests of their respective state sponsors. However, when these interests align, the narratives often overlap or reinforce one another, particularly in coordination with Russian narratives in the region. A prominent example of this convergence is the alignment of Iranian and Russian narratives concerning the United States and NATO.

The analysed sources unequivocally demonstrate that while the network society offers many benefits, such as universal access to information and the possibility of global communication, it also generates significant threats to democratic discourse and social stability. In the digital age, information is widely disseminated, and its control by traditional structures, such as mainstream media, is becoming increasingly ineffective. As a result, the importance of informational manipulation and disinformation has grown, leveraging the algorithms of social media platforms to reach specific groups, often through emotionally engaging and polarising content. Information manipulation – including the spread of false news, deliberate confusion, and oversimplification of complex issues – leads to an erosion of trust in institutions such as the media, governments, and international organisations. Consequently, societies become more susceptible to extreme and populist ideas, often providing simplistic answers to complex problems and exacerbating existing social and cultural divisions. This process is further driven by information bubbles, which limit audiences' exposure to diverse viewpoints, creating an "echo chamber" effect that reinforces extreme beliefs within a single group. The development of the network society also enables states and interest groups to conduct large-scale disinformation campaigns

⁵ M. Castells, *Władza komunikacji*. Warszawa 2013.

⁶ A. Hammond, *Saudi Arabia's Media Empire: keeping the masses at home*, "Arab Media and Society" 2007 [online:]
https://www.arabmediasociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/20071001152622_AMS3_Andrew_Hammond.pdf

that destabilise democratic processes by manipulating citizens' political choices and influencing their perceptions of critical social issues. Tools such as bots, fake accounts, and troll farms amplify and intensify messages, making it even more challenging for audiences to distinguish facts from manipulation.

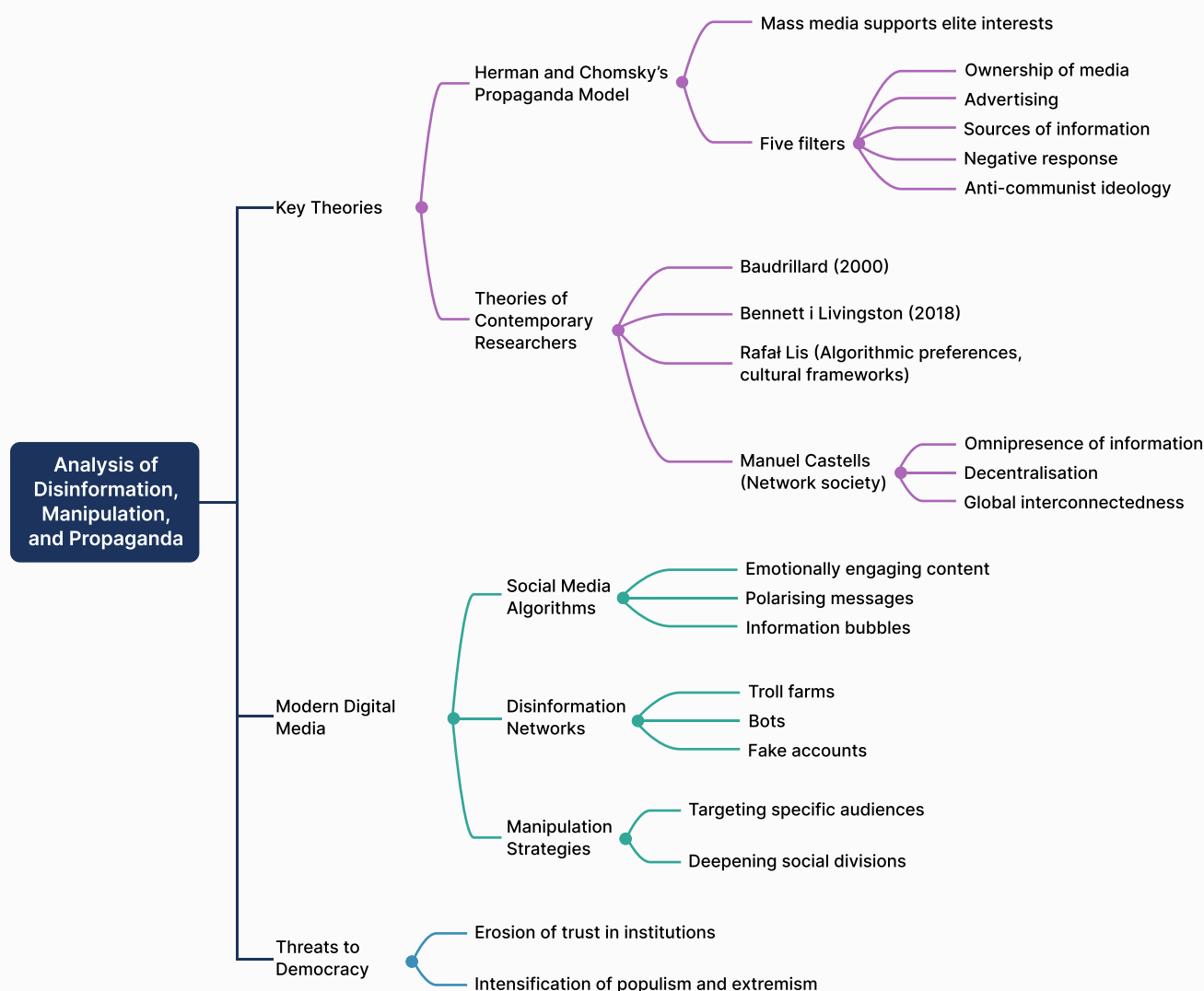


Figure 3: Analysis of Disinformation, Manipulation, and Propaganda.

Source: Own Study.

In summary, network societies, through the ease of creating and disseminating disinformation, demonstrate an increased susceptibility to informational manipulation. This contributes to deepening social divisions, enhances vulnerability to radical and populist ideas, and undermines the foundations of public trust. The weakening credibility of traditional institutions makes societies more prone to disinformation, posing a significant threat to social and political stability and the functioning of democratic structures in a rapidly evolving informational environment.

Chapter 2.

Russian Information Strategy

Information warfare constitutes an integral component of international conflicts. This phenomenon is not new; during the Cold War, the Soviet Union conducted extensive disinformation campaigns. For instance, through *Operation Tukan*, the KGB and Cuban intelligence orchestrated the publication of articles in Western—particularly American—newspapers aiming to discredit Augusto Pinochet's government in Chile. Additionally, the KGB utilized conspiracy theories for information warfare, such as propagating in the 1980s the theory that AIDS was created in American military laboratories as part of an experiment to infect people deliberately⁷.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the instability of the 1990s limited Moscow's capacity for international influence, especially in areas far from the Russian Federation, such as the Middle East. However, with the resurgence of Russian power and its imperial ambitions during Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin's first presidential term (2000–2004), Moscow once again sought to rebuild its influence, including in the Middle East and North Africa. To this end, it leveraged old Cold War alliances and developed new relations with countries from the former "Western bloc," such as Turkey and Israel.

The significance of this region for the Russian Federation's foreign policy is evidenced by its mention in the *2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept*, which emphasized that "the states of the friendly Islamic civilization [...] are increasingly desirable and reliable partners of Russia in ensuring security and stability and addressing global and regional economic issues." Priorities for the region included cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, comprehensive support for the Syrian Arab Republic, and deepening multifaceted partnerships with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation⁸. Key concerns highlighted included combating Islamophobia, resolving regional conflicts (e.g., between Iran and Arab states, Syria and its neighbours, and Israel and Arab nations), achieving a "lasting resolution to the Palestinian question," as well as combating terrorism and protecting Christianity in the Middle East. The 2023 Concept also dedicated an entire section to "information support for the Russian Federation's foreign policy activities." It underscored the need for Russia to bolster its position in the global information space to "counteract the coordinated anti-Russian

⁷ T. Boghardt, Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign, "Studies in Intelligence" Vol. 53, No. 4/2009, s. 1–24.

⁸ Ambasada Rosji w Polsce, Koncepcja polityki zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej (zatwierdzona przez Prezydenta Federacji Rosyjskiej Władimira Putina 31 marca 2023 r.), [online:] https://poland.mid.ru/pl/press-centre/news/koncepcja_polityki_zagranicznej_federacji_rosyjskiej_zatwierdzona_przez_prezydenta_federacji_rosyjsk/

propaganda campaign"⁹.

Russian affairs experts note that since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow has launched extensive disinformation campaigns¹⁰. These aim to promote narratives favourable to Russia or incite internal unrest within the European Union. For example, in 2019, Moscow attempted to influence the European Parliament elections through disinformation, including fabricated statements attributed to politicians¹¹. The goal was to foment unrest and deep polarization in Western states while strengthening pro-Russian factions. Additionally, Russia strives not only to disseminate its narratives but also to undermine the dissemination of other narratives, such as those of Ukraine or Poland, by discrediting them. Poland is often portrayed as an anti-Russian state engaged in the war in Ukraine to support U.S. political interests. In the Middle East, narratives emphasize Poland's alleged xenophobia, Islamophobia, and historical anti-Semitism, portraying Poles as opposed to cultural diversity. Migration issues are also frequently highlighted, suggesting Poland's hostility to Muslim migration.

A key tool in Russia's information warfare is state media such as **RT** (formerly *Russia Today*) and **Sputnik**, which disseminate Russian political narratives in multiple languages and target global audiences. These efforts are bolstered by extensive campaigns on social media, often relying on fake news and visual manipulation tailored to local contexts to evoke specific emotions and escalate social tensions. Peter Pomerantsev's book *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (2014) describes Russia's reliance on a post-truth strategy. In this approach, the **priority is not conveying facts but disseminating information to confuse audiences and foster doubt about the possibility of discerning truth**. Russian information services create multiple, often contradictory, narratives, creating an atmosphere of chaos that erodes the ability of audiences to differentiate between fact and manipulation.

Sputnik publishes in 31 languages, including Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, and operates Arabic- and Persian-language news channels. **Radio Sputnik** broadcasts in Turkish and Arabic, and **RT** has operated an Arabic-language channel since 2007. **The Russian News Agency** (Информационное агентство России, TASS) has offices in 57 countries and publishes in Arabic, among other languages. Funding has also increased alongside expanding its media network to reflect Russia's political goals. In 2022, Russia allocated approximately \$1.9 billion to its media, with significant funding directed toward RT,

⁹ Ambasada Rosji w Polsce, Koncepcja polityki zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej (approved by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on March 31, 2023), [online:] https://poland.mid.ru/pl/press-centre/news/koncepcja_polityki_zagranicznej_federacji_rosyjskiej_zatwierdzona_przez_prezydenta_federacji_rosyjsk/

¹⁰ M. Snegovaya, Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare. Institute for the Study of War, 2015, <https://tiny.pl/7gffgm4>

¹¹ A. Legucka, Walka z rosyjską dezinformacją w Unii Europejskiej, „Biuletyn PISM” nr 111(1859)/2019, <https://tiny.pl/6wm9h24c>

created for external audiences, and **Rossiia Segodnya**, which operates *Sputnik*¹².

It is worth taking a closer look at the media channels available to the Russians in the Middle East:

RT Arabic (روسيا اليوم - former Russia Today Arabic) broadcasts news programs, political analyses, and documentaries, enjoying substantial popularity in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Morocco, and the UAE. In addition to its TV broadcasts, the network operates a website that garners millions of monthly views. Social media platforms are also integral to RT Arabic's operations. For instance, the account @RTarabic on Platform X has 5,798,818 followers¹³. The Arabic-language channel gained popularity during regional conflicts like the Syrian Civil War. Its anti-Western stance often resonates with Arabic-speaking audiences.

Another Russian media outlet that enjoys significant popularity in the Middle East is **Sputnik**. It operates channels in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, with its Arabic-language channel being the most popular.

Sputnik Arabic operates in the Arab world through its website, which generates millions of visits per month, particularly gaining popularity in Egypt, Algeria, and Lebanon. In addition to its website, Sputnik Arabic runs radio channels and is highly active on social media. On the "X" platform, the account @Sputnik_ar has 382,619 followers, while its Telegram account has 154,281 followers. It also operates a WhatsApp channel with 5,371 followers. The Sputnik portal also publishes in other regional languages. **Sputnik Persian** has its most significant following on Telegram, with 233,064 subscribers; on "X," it has only 9,693 followers. The outlet also publishes in Turkish under **Sputnik Türkiye**, but its reach and popularity are limited. On "X," Sputnik Türkiye has 1,001,972 followers. For comparison, the **DW Türkçe** profile has 962,029 followers, **BBC News Türkçe** boasts 4,393,484 followers and **Euronews Türkçe** has 768,560 followers.

After the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the European Commission blocked access to Russian media, including RT and Sputnik, within the member states of the European Union¹⁴. Interestingly, Sputnik circumvented this restriction by changing its web address from *sputnikglobe.com* to *anlatilaninotesi.com.tr*, allowing continued access to the site despite the EU blockade. Similarly, Sputnik Persian switched its address to *spnfa.ir*,

¹² A. Michałowska-Kubś, J. Kubś, Putin's information war: Spending hits \$1.9 billion, Debunk.org., 4.05.2023, <https://www.debunk.org/kremlin-spent-1-9-billion-usd-on-propaganda-last-year-the-budget-exceeded-by-a-quarter>

¹³ All information about the number of followers is provided as of 22 November 2024.

¹⁴ Komisja Europejska, Russia Today i Sputnik wyłączone w UE, 2.03.2022, https://poland.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/russia-today-i-sputnik-wylaczone-w-ue-2022-03-02_pl

and Sputnik Arabic to **sarabic.ae**, enabling unrestricted access to content from within the EU. It is worth noting, however, that Sputnik International did not change its website address and remains accessible in the EU. The situation differs for social media platforms, where access to Russian channels is impossible without a VPN.

In the context of Russia's information warfare, tailoring messages to specific audience groups is crucial. The content presented by Arabic, Turkish, and Persian-language channels differs significantly. Arabic-language channels focus on the situation in the Middle East, dedicating substantial coverage to Russia's involvement in Syria and portraying Moscow as an ally in the fight against terrorism. Persian-language channels also promote an anti-Western narrative but with a primary focus on the United States and Israel. Turkish-language channels address migration issues and Turkish-EU relations. This demonstrates how well-thought-out and carefully tailored the messaging is in these media outlets.

Furthermore, Russia effectively utilises social media to reach young audiences and spread its narratives virally, influencing public sentiment and undermining trust in democratic institutions. In this context, videos and images can be easily manipulated and evoke strong emotions. Such materials frequently appear in the Middle East to discredit the United States and, more broadly, the West. For instance, exaggerated portrayals of civilian casualties have been circulated in the context of interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Troll farms, fake accounts, and fictitious news portals are highly effective tools for building communities and spreading narratives aligned with Russia's objectives. One prominent example is the Internet Research Agency, founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin. These groups manage fake social media accounts, creating and disseminating content aligned with specific narratives Russia seeks to promote. They also establish fake groups and pages that ostensibly support local interests, aiming to gain public approval and render audiences more susceptible to disinformation in the future. Bots, automated accounts generating posts and comments, play a critical role in amplifying particular narratives and deceiving social media algorithms by creating the illusion of significant public interest in particular topics.

Russia's information strategy, as part of a broader hybrid warfare approach (Figure 4), exemplifies an advanced and comprehensive method of political destabilisation and societal manipulation. By crafting and deploying disinformation in ways that foster polarisation and cast doubt on the credibility of democratic institutions, Russia poses challenges that compel democratic states to adapt to these new threats and develop practical tools to counteract such dangers.

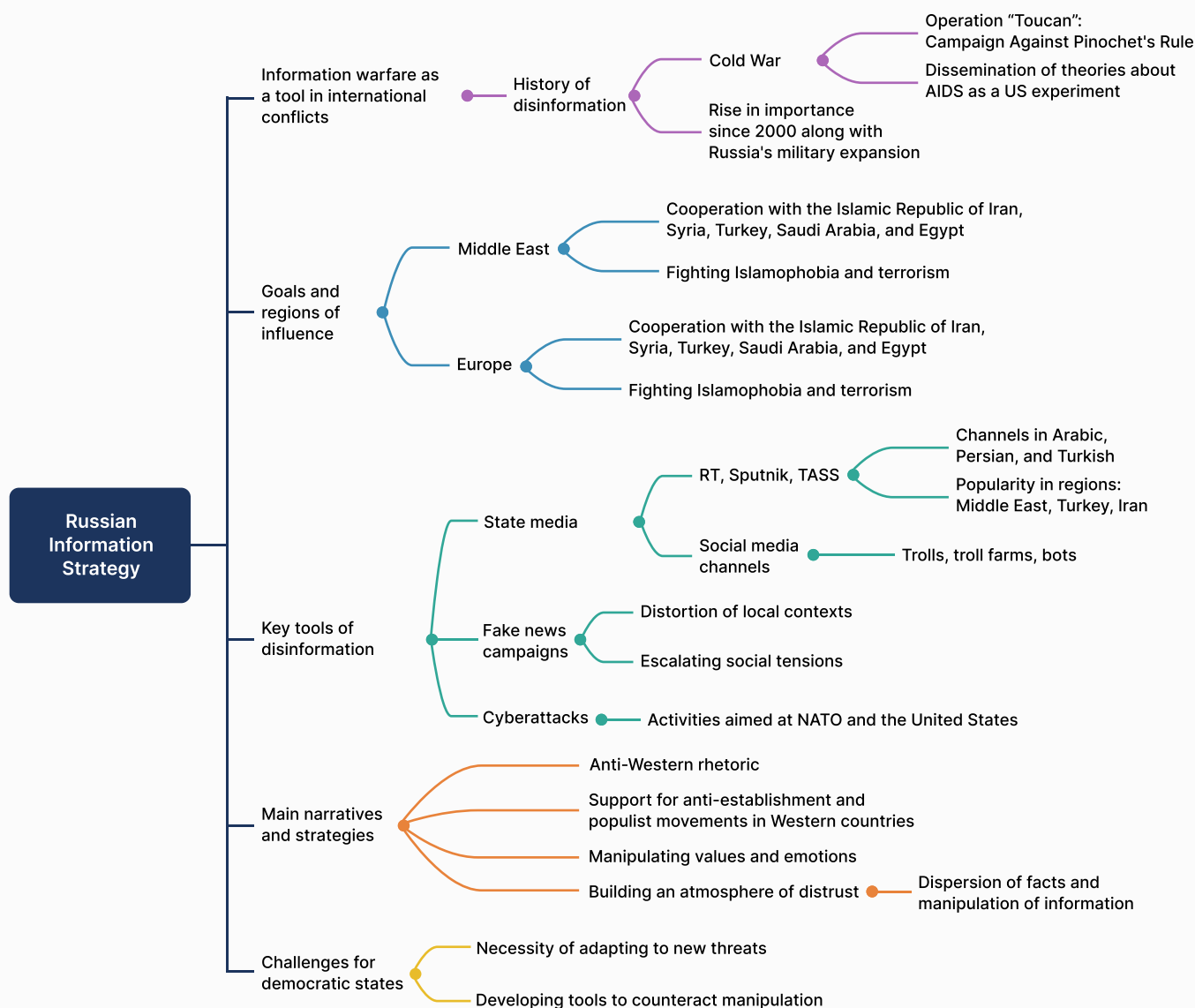


Figure 4: Russian Information Strategy.
Source: Own Study.

Chapter 3.

Tools and Techniques of Disinformation Used by Russia

Disinformation tools and techniques are two interconnected concepts. Both refer to methods of spreading false information and manipulating public opinion. Techniques encompass the strategies and methods employed to mislead audiences or manipulate facts. Tools, on the other hand, are the means and platforms used to implement these techniques.

This section will present the primary disinformation tools, which include traditional media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, and advanced digital solutions, such as internet bots, troll farms, social media platforms, data analysis tools, and disinformation techniques. These techniques include fact manipulation, the creation of false narratives, the sowing of doubt, and the amplification of extreme opinions and social polarisation. Both tools and techniques enable Russia to construct, disseminate, and sustain false information on an unprecedented scale while simultaneously allowing for rapid responses to changing circumstances and adapting narratives to local conditions. Analysing Russia's disinformation tools and techniques is crucial for understanding contemporary threats that affect not only European states and their societies but also the international order.

3.1. Disinformation Tools

Traditional Media

Russian state media and pro-Russian channels in Arab countries, such as **RT Arabic** **روسيا اليوم**, **Sputnik Arabic** **سبوتنيك بالعربي**, play a key role in disseminating Russia's narrative in the region. RT Arabic reinforces a pro-Russian stance, particularly in the context of conflicts in Syria and Libya, portraying Russia as a stabilising force. Sputnik Arabic, launched in 2014, regularly undermines the actions of the US and its allies, spreading anti-Western content through articles, interviews, and radio programmes, accessible in most Arab countries. Rusiya Al-Yaum, broadcast by RT, offers 24-hour coverage, presenting Russia as a defender of the rights of Arab nations, opposing Western interventionism.

Channels such as Lebanon's **Al-Mayadeen** الميادين, while not directly connected to Russia, align their narratives with the Kremlin's political interests. For example, in their coverage of the war in Ukraine, the channel reported that Ukrainian intelligence cooperates in Syria with the terrorist organisation Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, acting jointly against Russia¹⁵. Similarly, Lebanon's **Al-Manar** المنار, owned by Hezbollah, disseminates information published by RT without commentary, thereby amplifying Russia's narrative. For instance, on 18 November 2024, Al-Manar quoted the Russian Ministry of Defence, reporting the "liberation of the city of Novoalekseyevka in the Donetsk Republic and Ukrainian losses amounting to 1,900 killed"¹⁶. While not publishing its content in Arabic, **ANNA News** releases numerous videos of the Syrian Civil War. Consistent with Russian policy, it supports Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian Arab Army.



Figure 5: A frame from the ANNA News agency film titled "Операция Сирийской армии в Джобаре (р-н Дамаска). Точечная зачистка частного сектора" (Operation of the Syrian Army in Jobar (Damascus region). Targeted clearance of the residential sector, published on YouTube on 30 December 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5T0-8w6SL4&t=376s>

Additionally, Russia skilfully utilises every opportunity to disseminate its narrative through state media in the Middle East. A prime example is an interview conducted after the BRICS Summit in October 2024 with the Russian Federation's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, for the pro-government Turkish newspaper "Hürriyet". In the interview, the minister addressed the situation in the Middle East, emphasising that the lack of resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only leads to waves of violence and the deaths of thousands of

¹⁵ Kiev supports HTS to target Russia, Iran interests in Syria: Exclusive, "Al Mayadeen English" 19.11.2024, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/kiev-supporting-hts-to-target-russia--iran-interests-in-syri>

¹⁶ لروسة: تحرير بلدة جديدة في دونيتسك وخسائر أوكرانيا 1900 جندي خلال 24 ساعة "Al Manar" 18.11.2024, <https://www.almanar.com.lb/12800383>

of innocent people in Gaza and Lebanon. He highlighted that Russia intended to discuss this issue at the UN Security Council but was hindered by opposition from Western countries.

The text was framed to emphasise the strong Turkish-Russian relations and Moscow's gratitude for Turkey's mediation efforts in the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, a carefully crafted paragraph was included in which Lavrov stated: "Unfortunately, Ankara continues its cooperation with the regime in Kyiv in the military-technical field. Ukrainian armed forces are using Turkish weapons to kill Russian military personnel and civilians"¹⁷. Lavrov likely intended to provoke outrage in the Turkish media, ensuring the interview would reach a broad audience. Simultaneously, he sought to embed in Turkish society the notion of the "Kyiv regime" and Turkey's sale of weapons to Ukraine. At the same time, for readers who delved into the full interview, the tone underscored Turkey's significant role in

Russian policy and the alignment of interests between the two countries. Lavrov's approach proved successful. The text sparked outrage, leading to extensive commentary from Turkish media and internet users. When sharing the story, they predominantly quoted the statement about the "Kyiv regime" and Turkey's arms sales to Ukraine.

Websites and Blogs

In addition to traditional media, Russia actively utilises a network of websites and blogs that present themselves as independent but are aligned with Russian interests. Platforms such as *SouthFront* and *News Front* propagate pro-Russian narratives aimed at undermining the credibility of Western states and their institutions.



Figure 6: A page from the newspaper "Hürriyet" featuring an interview with Minister Lavrov, 1 November 2024

¹⁷ Rusya Dışişleri Bakanı dünya basınından Hürriyet'e konuştu: Türkiye Brics'e önemli katkı sağlayacak güçte bir ülke, "Hürriyet" 1.11.2024, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/rusya-disisleri-bakani-dunya-basinindan-hurriyet-konustu-turkiye-bricse-onemli-katki-saglayacak-guete-bir-ulke-42577189>

For example, they have accused the West of staging chemical attacks in Syria to justify military interventions against Bashar al-Assad's government¹⁸. Meanwhile, hacker groups like Fancy Bear and Cozy Bear further enhance disinformation strategies through cyberattacks on Western institutions. Cozy Bear has been accused of conducting cyberattacks on Western humanitarian organisations operating in the Middle East, such as UNHCR and Médecins Sans Frontières, to obtain data that could discredit them.

Websites publishing in multiple languages disseminate anti-Western narratives, promote conspiracy theories, and undermine trust in Western media. Research conducted by NATO StratCom (*Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*) indicates that Russia has developed a network of ostensibly independent websites that produce disinformation articles on topics such as migration issues, EU domestic politics, and events in Ukraine. For instance, the **SouthFront** portal, which focuses on analysing armed conflicts, primarily presents them from a Russian perspective and suggests alternative versions of events, often questioning the legitimacy of NATO and EU actions. Another example is *News Front*, which specialises in content related to events in Ukraine, creating a narrative about the "fascist threat and Nazi elements" within the Ukrainian government.

Table 1: Disinformation Tools Used by Russia

Category	Name	Description
Social Media	YouTube	A global video-sharing platform often used for publishing disinformation materials.
	Facebook	One of the largest social media platforms worldwide, used to spread fake news and create information bubbles.
	Instagram	A social media platform for sharing photos and short videos, utilised to craft emotionally engaging disinformation narratives.

¹⁸ ایران: نقاط غامضة في تقرير حادثه كيميائي خان شيخون "Sputnik Arab", 8.07.2017, <https://sarabic.ae/20170708/1024989190-نقاط-غموض-تقرير-خان-شيخون.html>

Category	Name	Description
	X (formerly Twitter)	A microblogging platform where fake accounts often amplify pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives.
	TikTok	A popular platform for sharing short videos, used for disseminating disinformation.
Russian State Media and Pro-Russian Channels in Arab Countries	RT Arabic روسيا اليوم	The Arabic channel of Russian broadcaster RT, presenting pro-Russian narratives on regional conflicts.
	Sputnik Arabic سبوتنيك بالعربية	The Arabic channel of the Russian news portal Sputnik, promoting anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives.
	Al-Mayadeen الميادين	A Lebanese news channel not directly linked to Russia but often aligned with Russian narratives.
	ANNA News	The Analytical Network News Agency, known for its footage from the Syrian Civil War filmed directly from the battlefield.
	Al-Manar المنار	A Lebanese channel founded by Hezbollah, promoting anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives.
Russian Social Media Platforms and Media	VKontakte (vk.com)	The largest Russian social media platform, promoting pro-government content.
	Odnoklassniki (ok.ru)	A social media platform popular among older users, particularly in Russia and CIS countries.

Kategoria	Nazwa	Opis
	Telegram	A popular messaging app used by pro-Russian channels for disseminating disinformation.
	Rutube (rutube.ru)	The Russian equivalent of YouTube, promoting pro-Russian video content.
	Dzen.ru (zen.yandex.ru)	A content aggregator owned by Yandex, promoting pro-Russian narratives.
	LiveJournal (livejournal.com)	An international blogging platform used for spreading pro-Russian narratives.
	Moi Mir (my.mail.ru)	A Russian equivalent of Facebook, amplifying pro-Russian narratives.
Known Disinformation Websites and Portals	SouthFront	A portal focused on conflict analysis, presenting events from a pro-Russian perspective.
	News Front	A portal publishing content on events in Ukraine, creating a pro-Russian narrative.
Institutions and Organisations Linked to Russian Disinformation Operations	Agencja Badań Internetowych (IRA)	A Russian organisation responsible for social media disinformation campaigns, particularly through fake accounts, trolling, and bot farms.
	Fancy Bear	A Russian hacker group associated with cyberattacks on Western institutions.

Kategoria	Nazwa	Opis
	Cozy Bear	A hacker group linked to Russian intelligence services, responsible for cyberattacks and disinformation operations.

Source: Own Study.

Social Media

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok are among the most popular tools for spreading disinformation. Their popularity stems from their vast global reach, ease of publishing and sharing content, and the ability for materials to gain significant traction before being verified or corrected. The anonymity they offer facilitates the creation of fake accounts and pages, often supported by troll farms and bots, which can manipulate algorithms to amplify the reach of posted content. Such content often carries strong emotional undertones, evoking fear or anger, making it more likely to be shared and commented on. Algorithms, in turn, use this data to create so-called information bubbles, whereby users are exposed only to content aligned with their previous preferences. This makes them more inclined to believe narratives consistent with their beliefs. Social media is also a relatively inexpensive medium for spreading disinformation, especially compared to traditional media costs.

For example, a satirical cartoon appeared on social media depicting an Israeli Jew and an Arab. The Jew accuses the Arab of anti-Semitism, to which the Arab responds that he is Semitic (referring to his ethnic origin), adding: "And you're from fucking Poland." Historically, this may reference the wave of Jewish migration from Central Europe; however, in the context of muscular Arab-Jewish tensions and accusations against Israel of killing civilians in Gaza and Lebanon, the cartoon also aims to provoke a negative attitude towards Poland. The post received over 93,000 likes and was shared nearly 18,000 times. The cartoon also appeared on other accounts on the "X" platform and was shared on Instagram. It was not only circulated in English but also in Spanish (earlier than in English). Interestingly, the cartoon had previously circulated online (in November 2023) but with a different context—it did not reference Poland but rather the Semitic origin of Arabs.



Figure 7: A post from the "X" platform, published by the account @DrLoupis (1.4 million followers) on 28 September 2024.

Russia actively uses social media as a tool to influence foreign societies. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), in collaboration with The Syria Campaign, examined this issue in the context of the war in Syria. Hundreds of posts were analysed (900,000 on the "X" platform, formerly Twitter), published in English between 2015 and 2021 on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The team identified 28 individuals, media outlets, and organisations responsible for disseminating disinformation about the Syrian conflict. Based on content analysis, 47,000 misleading tweets and 817 Facebook posts



Figure 8: A post from the "X" platform, published by the account @ElNecio_Cuba (241,000 followers) on 31 May 2024.



Figure 9: A post from the "X" platform, published on 16 November 2023.

were identified¹⁹. Official accounts of Russian embassies, which often disseminated such content first, significantly contributed to spreading this information. Nearly half of the posts targeted the humanitarian organisation Syrian Civil Defence, known as the "White Helmets." Russian narratives accused its members of collaborating with terrorists.

One cannot overlook the role of Russian social media platforms, which function both as information hubs and disinformation tools, playing a key part in implementing Russia's influence strategies. The most prominent social media platform is **Vkontakte (VK)**, which resembles Facebook but focuses on Russian-speaking users and the diaspora. It is used to disseminate pro-government content and engage users in groups that support anti-Western narratives, aiming to strengthen the Kremlin's authority. VK is also available in Arabic, although it has not gained the same popularity in the region as other platforms (Facebook, X, Instagram). A similar situation exists with **Odnoklassniki (ok.ru)**, which operates in the region but in a minimal capacity and is primarily popular among Russian-speaking audiences. The **Telegram** messaging app (telegram.org) also plays a significant role.

Each of these platforms contributes to the implementation of Russia's information strategy, which aims to polarise, weaken social capital, and undermine trust in Western institutions. Russia's disinformation strategy on social media is comprehensive and tailored to diverse political environments. Through such actions, Russia effectively causes destabilisation and introduces confusion in target societies, illustrating the breadth of information operations conducted by the Kremlin. This is further exemplified by the use of influencers.

On YouTube and X, Maram Susli (Mimi al-Laham), known as "SyrianGirlpartisan" and @Partisangirl, has gained significant popularity. Born in Damascus and residing in Australia, the vlogger has often been accused of supporting Bashar al-Assad and presenting the Syrian war in alignment with Russia's propaganda. In her videos, she accuses the United States and NATO of supporting terrorism (e.g., the so-called Islamic State) and attempting to overthrow the government in Damascus²⁰. Her content frequently features clips from ANNA News and RT.

¹⁹ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Deadly Disinformation. How online conspiracies about Syria cause real-world harm, s. 3, https://deadlydisinformation.org/source/Deadly_Disinformation_EN.pdf

²⁰ The Truth About Aleppo Victory Tribute, "YouTube" kanał SyrianGirlpartisan, film z 22.12.2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLylpRn9uXQ>



Figure 10 and 11: Frames from the video published on YouTube: The Truth About Aleppo Victory Tribute, "YouTube" channel SyrianGirlpartisan, 22 December 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLylpRn9uXQ>

3.2. Disinformation Techniques

The most commonly used disinformation techniques include:

- Fake news;
- Context manipulation;
- Conspiracy theories;
- False grassroots movements (astroturfing);
- Ad hominem attacks;
- Whataboutism ("What about...?");
- Visual disinformation;
- False authorities;
- Fabricated quotes and documents.

Fake news is one of the simplest and most frequently employed forms of disinformation. It involves spreading false or manipulated content to make it appear legitimate media information. Regarding the Middle East, Russia uses this technique to propagate an anti-Western narrative. For example, it has disseminated claims that the United States supported terrorists from the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria. One instance involved the Russian Ministry of Defence publishing a series of fabricated images purportedly proving U.S. support for ISIS. After the manipulation was exposed, the TASS agency reported it as an accidental, erroneous use of the photographs yet continued to insist that the underlying claims were valid²¹.

²¹ P. P. Murphy, Russia uses fake photos to accuse US of supporting ISIS, "CNN" 14.11.2017, [online:]
<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/14/us/russia-fake-photos-accusation-trnd/index.html>

A closely related technique is **context manipulation**. This involves taking a truthful piece of information out of context to alter its meaning. For instance, pro-Russian and pro-Iranian media portrayed U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq solely as acts of aggression against Muslim countries and as examples of Western colonialism in the region, omitting other factors such as terrorist attacks. Russia's use of this technique aimed—and continues to aim—to create a uniformly negative image of the West. An example of context manipulation includes images from the Kursk region, which appeared on social media. According to a Turkish post on "X," the footage purportedly shows the gradual surrender of the Ukrainian army. In reality, the video depicts the execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war.



Figure 12: A post from the "X" platform, published by the account @AMaresyev (9,000 followers) on 10 November 2024.

Equally common in the context of context manipulation are videos and photos purportedly depicting the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border. According to Russian narratives, a group of refugees from the Middle East attempting to cross the EU's external border consists primarily of women and children — as shown in frames from a video published by RT — contrary to the actual situation. This narrative, supplemented by additional illustrations, also circulates on social media, often accompanied by comments about violence and claims that these individuals are being left without food and water.



Figure 13 i 14: Frames from the RT film "Asylum in Europe is a Dream":
<https://mf.b37mrtl.ru/media/vids/2022.01/61f3bd3f4236041598117361.mp4>

A very old disinformation technique is the **dissemination and promotion of conspiracy theories**. These often aim to foster distrust among the public toward governments, international institutions, or specific social groups. Sputnik Arabic published articles suggesting that Qatar and the United States supported the Arab Spring to advance their own interests in the region²². Similarly, after the terrorist attack in Ankara in October 2024, conspiracy theories emerged linking President Erdoğan's attendance at the BRICS summit in Kazan to the attack in Ankara's Kazan district, as well as associating the attack itself with Turkey's attempt to join BRICS. This approach sought to fuel narratives in which recipients of the manipulation would connect the West to the terrorist attack.



Figure 15: A post from the "X" platform, published by the account @IranObserver0 (490,000 followers) on 30 October 2024.

Fake accounts and pages assist in creating **false grassroots movements** and artificially generated, spontaneous support or opposition for specific initiatives, ideas, or individuals. This technique creates the impression that a particular movement, initiative, or opinion enjoys widespread backing. After 2014, such movements began to appear in Libya, for instance, to build support for the Russian-aligned commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Khalifa Haftar.

²² (الحلقة الثانية) دمشق: حقائق خفية عن الربيع العربي (الجزء الثاني), "Sputnik Arabic" 13.05.2015, [online:] <https://sarabic.ae/20150513/1014267592.html>, مفاجأة روسية... كواليس الدور القطري في إسقاط أربعة أنظمة عربية (فيديو), "Sputnik Arabic" 26.04.2018, [online:] <https://tiny.pl/4bv4f6dp>

Ad hominem attacks represent another manipulative technique that supports disinformation. This type of argumentation does not address the substance of an issue but instead targets the opponent personally. Focusing on personal traits, appearance, or the speaker's past seeks to discredit them in the eyes of the audience, divert attention from arguments and facts, and contribute to escalating conflict. This technique is effortless to exploit in regions with deep religious and ethnic divisions, such as MENAT. In Russian practice, human rights activists are often discredited by accusing them of attempting to destabilise states or acting as agents of the West.

A similar manipulation technique is **whataboutism**, which involves diverting attention from the discussed issue by pointing to other, allegedly more scandalous or significant matters. It is used to avoid addressing criticism or to downplay responsibility. This technique is frequently observed in the Middle East, where, for example, state A is criticised for human rights violations, but it is argued that state B, which points out these violations, behaves in the same manner. For instance, Turkey denies Israel the right to criticise its violation of Kurdish rights of Kurds, referencing the Tel Aviv government's treatment of Palestinians. This mechanism also works in reverse.

The following meme aptly illustrates this technique in the MENAT context:



Figure 16: A post from the platform "X," published by the account @aisha_muhammedz (6k followers) on October 26, 2024.

It is also noteworthy that **modified or manipulated photos and videos are used to create a false impression or fabricate evidence**. These materials are intended to provoke a strong public reaction and influence people's perceptions. They often aim to elicit strong emotions like fear, compassion, or hatred. In this context, images from conflict zones are frequently published, which—as it later turns out—depict a different war or location. For instance, after the terrorist attack in Ankara in October 2024, social media posts emerged claiming to identify one of the female terrorists responsible for the attack (the first image on the left was said to be from surveillance footage, while the second was artificially generated). According to these social media claims, the individual was allegedly Farah Karim, a CIA agent, supposedly proving U.S. involvement in the attack. However, as quickly pointed out by online users, Farah Karim, depicted in the second image in the post, is a character from the video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. This was a clumsy attempt at manipulation, as internet users promptly debunked it. Nonetheless, the post managed to spread, being shared over 100 times.



Figure 17: A screenshot from the platform "X," featuring a post by the account @squatsons (approximately 150k followers).

A form of disinformation through imagery is **memes**, which are highly prevalent on social media platforms. Their effectiveness lies in their concise and simplified messages, often devoid of context, which makes them easily memorable. Memes swiftly elicit emotional responses, rendering them more challenging to critically evaluate, particularly as they frequently draw upon prejudices and stereotypes. By provoking strong emotions such as fear, anger, or amusement, they are rapidly disseminated among audiences.



Figure 18: An image that has appeared multiple times on the platforms "X" and "Instagram".

Part of disinformation campaigns involves **creating, fabricating, and using false authorities, institutions, and organisations—individuals or entities that present themselves as experts but lack the necessary qualifications.** Their purpose is to undermine the opinions of genuine experts, leading audiences to equate expert opinions with pseudo-expert claims. False authorities often cite non-existent publications, analyses, and studies to lend themselves credibility. Fake think-tank websites and research agencies are also established online to disseminate false or manipulated research findings. In some cases, false authorities take the form of fabricated religious leaders who offer specific interpretations of events, such as endorsing or justifying acts of violence.

Another technique, often used in conjunction with the aforementioned methods, is **attributing words, documents, or works to well-known individuals or institutions that they never created or endorsed.** These can range from entirely fabricated content to material taken out of context. This strategy is frequently employed in memes, combining such content with recognised and respected figures. Due to their concise and often humorous

format, these memes tend to be memorable. This approach also facilitates the creation of false expert statements, associating renowned and respected names with content they never produced, thereby discrediting them in the eyes of the public.

3.3. Conclusions

The analysis of Russia's disinformation strategies highlights the multilayered nature of its information tactics, which encompass both traditional and modern propaganda tools as well as advanced techniques for manipulating public opinion. **These strategies are a deliberate component of the Kremlin's policy, aimed at destabilising the political and social order of Western countries and undermining trust in democratic institutions.** Such actions threaten not only the informational security of individual states but also international cohesion, particularly in the context of communities like the European Union and NATO.

The theoretical foundations of Russia's disinformation strategy stem from the Soviet doctrine of information warfare, which relied on creating false narratives and selectively presenting facts to manipulate public opinion and weaken adversaries. Russia's disinformation efforts represent an element of modern cognitive warfare, which aims not at direct military intervention but at manipulating opponents' thought processes, perceptions, and decisions to achieve strategic objectives. From the perspective of strategic communication theory, disinformation campaigns exemplify performative politics, where the Kremlin generates media phenomena designed to provoke specific emotional reactions and influence public opinion. These actions, characterised by repeated symbolic acts, including disseminating false information, can shape attitudes and reinforce false beliefs within the public consciousness, especially when repeated systematically and consistently. This mechanism proves highly effective in Russian disinformation, as the repetition of identical narratives across various media outlets significantly influences how audiences interpret reality.

The analysis of techniques employed in Russian disinformation reveals a broad spectrum of methods, ranging from simple fake news to sophisticated propaganda campaigns utilising diverse media and information channels. A cornerstone of Russian disinformation is the dissemination of so-called *fake news*, representing the most basic level of information manipulation. Jan-Werner Müller (2016), in his theory of populism, argues that false information aims not to inform but to engage emotionally and construct an "alternative reality." This mirrors the Kremlin's disinformation strategies, which frequently rely on alternative narratives.

Cherry picking and context manipulation are additional disinformation techniques Russia uses. In persuasive communication, these are classified as "selective exposure," designed to direct the audience's attention to specific fragments of information. Classic selective perception theory suggests that people are inclined to believe information aligning with their pre-existing beliefs. This indicates that Russia's selective presentation of facts is a method to reinforce existing biases and deepen social polarisation. In practice, such narratives often focus on controversial topics, such as U.S. military interventions in the Middle East, portrayed by Russian media as acts of aggression. This constructs a negative image of the West and amplifies mistrust and division among audiences.

Russia leverages social media platforms such as Facebook, X, YouTube, and Telegram as primary channels for disseminating disinformation, tailoring its communication strategies to the unique characteristics of these platforms. Social media enables the rapid spread of content and, through algorithmic mechanisms, facilitates the creation of so-called "information bubbles." Platforms like YouTube and Facebook allow Russia to exert direct influence on global audiences, which, from the perspective of transnational propaganda theory, supports constructing an international narrative network advancing Kremlin interests. In this context, Telegram plays a particularly significant role, as it enables the unmoderated dissemination of information and is used by organisations whose accounts are blocked on other social media platforms.

Russia also relies on traditional state-controlled media outlets such as RT, Sputnik, and a network of affiliated channels in the Arab world and Iran to reach a broad global audience. These media play a pivotal role in fostering a long-term positive image of Russia as a stabilising force in international politics while demonising Western nations. Outlets like Sputnik aim to portray Russia as a credible actor on the global stage. Furthermore, Russia has developed a network of quasi-independent websites that publish articles aligned with the Kremlin's propaganda agenda while masquerading as objective and independent media. This strategy exemplifies *astroturfing*, where disinformation is disguised as "grassroots" social initiatives, adding a layer of credibility to its narratives.

One of the primary objectives of Russian disinformation is to destabilise societies through polarisation and the exacerbation of social tensions. The Kremlin crafts narratives rooted in conspiracy theories to foster distrust and fear towards democratic governments. Conspiracy theories, including accusations of the West manipulating events, serve as practical tools to create distance from official institutions, a key element of Russia's destabilisation strategy. Within this framework, Russia often promotes alternative narratives aimed at undermining faith in a single, "objective" truth, fostering a sense of relativism and questioning the significance of facts. As Hannah Arendt noted in the context of totalitarian mechanisms, "undermining truth is an effective form of power because it

fractures the trust between individuals and reality"²³. By disseminating multiple versions of the same events, such as the causes of conflicts in Syria or Ukraine, the Kremlin seeks to create the illusion that truth is relative and ultimately unattainable.

Russia also employs techniques that involve creating and promoting false authorities presented as experts to enhance the credibility of propagandistic narratives. In the context of Russian disinformation, false authorities frequently appear at international conferences and publish in seemingly prestigious journals, thereby further disseminating and legitimising pro-Russian content. Additionally, the role of online influencers and bloggers is significant; they openly support pro-Russian narratives, presenting them as personal views and opinions. Social media platforms are highly effective tools for building trust and amplifying the reach of false narratives. By leveraging the authority of influencers, Russia can effectively target younger generations, who are more susceptible to the content transmitted in this manner.

In conclusion, Russia's disinformation strategy is built upon a complex system of tools and techniques, all aimed at destabilising target states' social and political structures. Analysing tools such as state-controlled media, social media platforms, and quasi-independent websites reveals a sophisticated and well-designed influence strategy. These actions are tailored to local conditions, ensuring effectiveness across diverse socio-political contexts. From the perspective of informational security and social cohesion, Russian disinformation campaigns pose a significant threat, necessitating increased oversight of content on social media platforms and public education on recognising information manipulation. Building resilience against disinformation is crucial in countering Russia's destabilising influence and defending democratic values. Combating Russian disinformation, however, requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theories from communication studies, psychology, and political science, enabling more effective responses to these threats in the future.

²³ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1951.

Chapter 4.

Analysis of the Effects of Disinformation

4.1. Political Effects of Disinformation

Undermining trust in public institutions, including governments, parliaments, courts, and media.

Example: Attempts to discredit humanitarian aid provided by Western governments. The Syrian Civil Defence, known as the "White Helmets," operates in opposition-controlled regions of Syria and is primarily recognised for providing humanitarian aid and rescuing civilians during airstrikes and bombings. The organisation collaborates with international humanitarian bodies, such as the United Nations and non-governmental organisations, and has also received funding from governments, including the United States, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In Russian narratives, the "White Helmets" have been portrayed as an organisation collaborating with terrorist groups in Syria, such as an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, and "staging" chemical attacks to justify Western intervention. An example includes the Polish website PrisonPlanet.pl, which published "evidence" from Syrian social media posts alleging that the "White Helmets" were responsible for acts of sabotage²⁴.

Deepening existing social divisions

Example: Russian propaganda exploits the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by presenting emotionally charged narratives, such as those from the Gaza Strip. Additionally, Russia portrays Western states as supporters of Israel, accusing them of applying double standards by defending human rights in some countries while ignoring them in the context of Palestinians. In contrast to the United States, Moscow positions itself as a mediator and defender of justice.

²⁴ Mimi Al-Laham, Grupa powiązana z Sorosem stoi za atakiem chemicznym w Syrii, „Prison Planet.pl”, https://www.prisonplanet.pl/polityka/grupa_powiazana_z_sorosem,p342957705

Manipulation of voters

Examples:

- During the parliamentary elections in Lebanon in 2022, pro-Russian media suggested that Western states manipulated the elections. International organisations were accused of favouring and financially supporting parties opposing Hezbollah²⁵.
- In 2021, presidential elections were held in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad won over 90% of the votes. Russian media portrayed these elections as fair and democratic while accusing the opposition of being Western agents and Western states of attempting to destabilise Syria by undermining the election result²⁶.

Destabilisation of governments and political systems

Example: The 2021 elections in Iraq. Numerous posts on Telegram suggested that the government deliberately delayed the publication of election results to manipulate the outcomes in favour of certain parties. Abu Ali Askari, the spokesperson for Kata'ib Hezbollah (a radical Shia paramilitary group operating in Iraq), issued a statement on Telegram describing the elections as "the greatest fraud" and calling for military action²⁷.

²⁵ Lebanon's Fragile Political Balance Endangered by Parliamentary Election Results, „Sputnik International” 16.05.2022, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20220516/lebanons-fragile-political-balance-endangered-by-parliamentary-election-results-1095555669.html>

²⁶ Асад подал заявку на регистрацию кандидатом на президентских выборах в Сирии, “TASS” 21.04.2021, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/11204823>

²⁷ S. Yuan, Iraq election body soon to announce final results after recount, „Al Jazeera” 27.10.2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/27/independent-body-to-give-verdict-on-iraq-election>



Figure 20: Mind Map – Political Effects of Disinformation.

Source: Own Study.

4.2. Social Effects of Disinformation

Increasing Social Polarisation

Example: In the context of the Syrian conflict, Russian media outlets such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic promoted narratives that reinforced support for Bashar al-Assad's government while portraying the Syrian opposition as a "terrorist threat" backed by the West²⁸. This messaging resulted in the polarisation of Syrian society, dividing it into supporters and opponents of the government and provoking antagonism between different religious groups. The social effects include escalating tensions between Sunnis and Shias and growing hostility towards the Syrian refugee community.

Lowering Citizens' Trust in Governmental and International Institutions

Example: During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous posts questioned the effectiveness of American and European vaccines and exaggerated their side effects while emphasising the efficacy, availability, and affordability of the Russian Sputnik-V vaccine. Interestingly, the same networks of accounts rarely commented on the Chinese vaccine²⁹. This campaign aimed to undermine trust in Western vaccines and challenge the transparency of international organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Western governments. The long-term impact of these narratives includes an increase in anti-Western sentiments within society and heightened resistance to cooperation with Western countries.

Increase in Radicalisation and Social Extremism

The intensification of polarisation and the promotion of extreme narratives contribute to the growth of radical attitudes among citizens. In Europe, this fosters the rising popularity of nationalist and Eurosceptic movements, while in MENAT countries, it strengthens support for anti-Western movements. In the Middle East, particularly in Iran and Syria, Russian narratives promote resistance against the West and accuse it of destabilising the region³⁰, leading to increased support for radical and anti-imperialist groups.

²⁸ نائبي روسي-أمريكا تمنح الإرهابيين فرصة لإنشاء دولة لهم في سوريا (Rosyjski poseł: Ameryka daje terrorystom możliwość założenia dla siebie państwa w Syrii), "Sputnik Arabic" 2.12.2024, <https://sarabic.ae/20241202/1095418538-سوريا-فرصة-لإنشاء-دولة-لهم-في-سوريا.html>

²⁹ Putin: Sputnik V, Omicron varyantına karşı diğer aşılardan daha etkili, "Sputnik Türkiye" 17.12.2021, <https://anlatilaninotesi.com.tr/20211217/putin-sputnik-v-omicron-varyantina-karsi-diger-asilardan-daha-etkili-1051869436.html>

³⁰ تلاش-جنون-آمیز-بایدن-برای-به-هم-ریختن-جهان-قبل-از-تحویل-قدرت-به-ترامپ (Szalona próba Bidena schrzaniania świata przed oddaniem władzy Trumpowi), "Sputnik Iran" 11.12.2024, <https://spnfa.ir/20241211/21091803-تلاش-جنون-آمیز-بایدن-برای-به-هم-ریختن-جهان-قبل-از-تحویل-قدرت-به-ترامپ.html>



Figure 21: Mind Map – Social Effects of Disinformation.
Source: Own Study.

Chapter 5.

Strategies for Creating Counter-Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa

Analyzing the situation in the MENAT region provides a valuable basis for formulating recommendations for Poland, particularly in countering Russian disinformation and its influence on Poland's image.

Strengthening Diplomatic Efforts. As a European Union and NATO member, Poland should develop diplomatic strategies to counterbalance pro-Russian narratives. These strategies could include:

- Activation of diplomatic missions in the MENAT region through the regular organisation of conferences, seminars, and meetings that promote an understanding of Poland's policies and its activities on the international stage.
- Initiating multilateral dialogue focused on regional issues such as migration, counterterrorism, and economic stabilisation. Poland can engage MENAT countries in discussions about shared challenges, presenting its experiences and solutions.
- Delivering clear diplomatic messages explaining Poland's position on key regional issues, such as the situation in Ukraine, Polish migration policy, or NATO's role.
- Engaging Polish experts, academics, and analysts recognised in the target country. This way, the message is not solely official or diplomatic but is reinforced by external authority.

Development of soft power and increased media presence. Russia uses media to spread disinformation, which is particularly evident in the MENAT region. Poland could develop its soft power tools to promote a diversified image of its role on the international stage.

- Establishing information channels in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian to provide objective information about Poland, the EU, and NATO. This would allow Poland to deliver messages directly to the people of the MENAT region, who are exposed to pro-Russian narratives.

- Supporting independent media and journalists in the region through scholarships, training, and exchange programmes, enabling the dissemination of more reliable information about Poland and Europe.
- Building a presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X, with dedicated accounts targeting MENAT countries, to promote Polish culture, education, science, and foreign policy.
- Promoting the presence of Polish expert voices in regional media so that the goals and conditions of Poland's foreign policy are not presented solely through official channels.

Education and Scientific Cooperation. Educational and scientific cooperation with the MENAT region can effectively promote Poland's image and foster an understanding of Polish policies.

- Investing in educational and scholarship programmes for students from the MENAT region. Such initiatives would not only support the development of local elites who understand Polish policies but also establish lasting relationships with future leaders from the region who better understand Poland and its international role.
- Leveraging the fact that Poland is the most popular destination for Turkish students under the ERASMUS+ programme to shape a positive image of the country upon their return.
- Developing joint research projects and academic initiatives focused on security, migration, intercultural dialogue, and combating disinformation. Involving local scientists and experts can help promote objective narratives.
- Organising seminars and workshops in the MENAT region to present Poland as a partner in education and science would also help break stereotypes and counter negative narratives.

Strengthening the Capacity to Counter Disinformation. As detailed in the document, the Russian disinformation strategy requires appropriate countermeasures that will enable Poland to combat false narratives and manipulations effectively.

- Cooperation with international organisations, such as NATO, the EU, and the Council of Europe, in monitoring and combating disinformation. Poland should actively participate in efforts to develop standards and methodologies for detecting disinformation in the MENAT region.

- Developing its own media monitoring tools for the MENAT region to regularly analyse narratives about Poland and enable a swift response to false information.
- Strengthen collaboration with regional partners who may also be targets of Russian disinformation to provide mutual support and share experiences in countering hybrid informational attacks.

Promoting Poland as an Economic Partner. By engaging economically in the MENAT region, Poland can increase its influence and contribute to building a positive image of the country.

- Encouraging Polish enterprises to invest in MENAT countries, particularly in sectors related to infrastructure, information technologies, and energy. Poland could position itself as an attractive partner in modern technologies, providing a contrast to pro-Russian narratives.
- Organising trade missions and B2B meetings for Polish entrepreneurs and partners from the MENAT region to establish connections and promote Poland as a reliable economic partner.
- Developing public-private partnerships to support infrastructure development and technology projects in the region's countries. Such initiatives could help build long-term economic relationships and strengthen Poland's positive image.

Creating Alternative Narratives and Promoting a Positive Image. To effectively counter Russian narratives, Poland should promote alternative narratives based on values aligned with the interests and culture of MENAT region countries.

- Poland can present itself as a multicultural country open to intercultural dialogue, particularly in the context of Polish-Muslim historical relations. Poland can emphasise its heritage of religious tolerance, which would be beneficial in relations with MENAT countries.
- Developing information campaigns aimed at MENAT societies, highlighting shared values and interests such as security, stability, and prosperity.
- Building Poland's image as a country friendly to legal migrants and committed to promoting human rights could be particularly important in countering negative narratives about Polish migration policies.

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