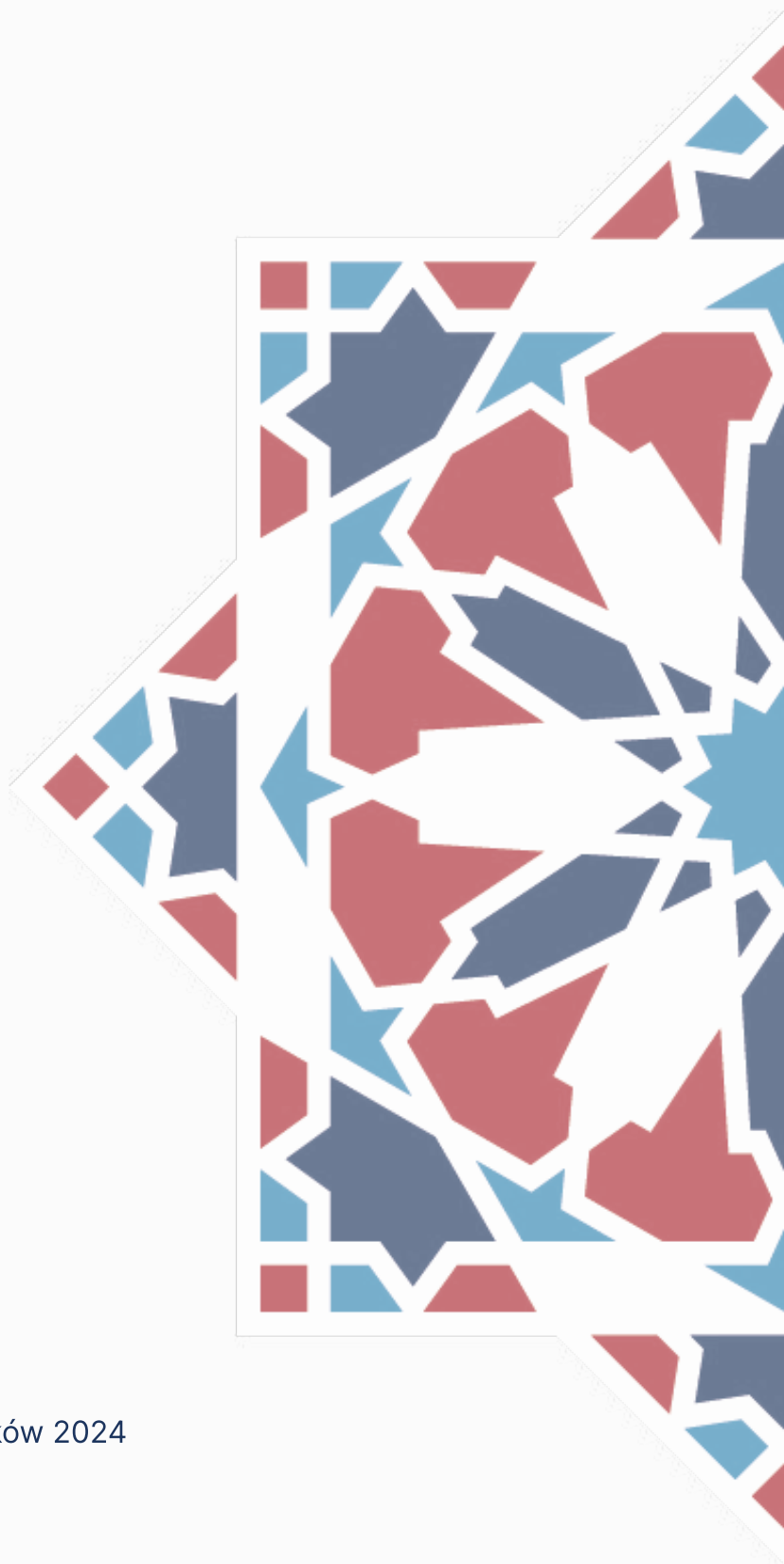
Instytut Badań nad Turcją

Disinformation in MENAT

Report

# Russian Disinformation in Iran



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# About the project

Instytut Badań nad Turcją

Disinformation in MENAT

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# Author of the publication

## Marcin Krzyżanowski

**IBnT Expert**

Orientalist, entrepreneur, and former diplomat. Since 2018, a lecturer at the Centre for International Studies and Development at Jagiellonian University. Between 2008 and 2011, he served as the Consul of the Republic of Poland in Kabul and Head of the Political and Economic Section at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Kabul. From 2017 to 2018, he was a Polish language lecturer at the University of Tehran. His research interests include the Middle East and South Asia economy and politics, asymmetric conflicts, regional security, and terrorism in strategic and political contexts. A significant aspect of his scholarly work also addresses universal human rights as an ideological and cultural conflict field. He is an expert at the Institute for Turkish Studies.

# Introduction

For this report, disinformation is defined as the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information to deceive or confuse the audience and promote one's political agenda. The Russian disinformation campaign, often referred to as an "information war," constitutes one of the most significant challenges for contemporary Western societies and Western policy in the Middle East. Individual operations within this campaign are conducted by specialised units of Russian services and a network of Russian and pro-Russian media (Zadrozny, 2024) to influence public opinion, destabilise political situations in various countries, and undermine citizens' trust in democratic institutions. Importantly, in Russian strategy, the information war is not confined to periods of kinetic operations. It is not even limited to the so-called initial phase of a conflict, i.e., before the commencement of direct military actions. It encompasses the informational preparation of the battlefield, which involves adequately motivating one's own and allied soldiers and citizens while demotivating and sowing confusion among the opponent. Unlike other forms and methods of confrontation, informational conflict is conducted by Russians virtually continuously, even during peacetime (Nocetti, 2019).

Russia employs disinformation as a significant tool in its foreign policy, grounded in the concept of hybrid warfare. This is defined in the report as a combination of military, economic, political, and informational activities aimed at achieving the objectives of a given party to the conflict. The skilful use of this tool enables Russia to attain strategic goals without formally declaring war. Disinformation plays a central role in this process, facilitating the destabilisation of adversaries through chaos, undermining trust in democratic institutions, and exacerbating social divisions. It allows Moscow to operate in the "grey zone" between peace and war, challenging traditional international security mechanisms (Alander, 2024).

One of the foundations of Russia's disinformation strategy is creating and disseminating narratives that appear credible, often even based on facts, yet are manipulative. An example is the fabrication of false information about alleged threats to local communities, such as the mythical "crimes of Ukrainian nationalists" during the war in Ukraine. Such actions aim to discredit Russia's opponents and deepen internal divisions within Western states. Another mechanism involves using social media to spread fake news and manipulate public debate. Russian "troll farms" and internet bots play a key role in disseminating disinformation on a global scale. They often impersonate ordinary users to amplify the reach of their messages. In this way, they have previously succeeded in influencing the outcomes of the U.S. presidential elections in 2016, 2020, and 2024, as well as the Brexit referendum (De Luce and Collier, 2024).

The threats posed by Russian disinformation are multi-dimensional. First and foremost, they undermine social trust and the foundations of democracy by disrupting the electoral process. Disinformation creates informational chaos, in which voters cannot distinguish truth from falsehood. This can lead to increased social polarisation and the escalation of political conflicts. One of the most dangerous aspects is its impact on international security. Disinformation can weaken societies' responses to threats like military aggression. An example is the attempt to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine through false accusations regarding "threats from NATO," corruption, extravagant lifestyles, and an alleged plan by Ukrainians to assassinate Tucker Carlson (Zadrożny, 2024).

Russian disinformation is one of the key tools of hybrid warfare, used to destabilise states, influence societies and undermine democratic values. Therefore, reports on Russian disinformation, including this one, play a crucial role in understanding this phenomenon's mechanisms, objectives, and scale. The primary aim of such reports is to identify the sources and methods of disinformation, assess its social and political impacts, and propose effective countermeasures. These reports also aim to raise public and institutional awareness of the threats posed by information manipulation. They highlight how Russia utilises digital technologies, social media, and traditional media channels to disseminate false narratives and fuel tensions. Additionally, these reports serve as a tool for policymakers and international organisations, aiding in developing strategies to counter Russian information operations.

## Research Methodology

The primary tool employed for this report was the monitoring of disinformation sources, such as Persian-language Russian media outlets (Sputnik Iran, RIA Novosti), Iranian media (Press TV, IRIB 1), and 30 social media accounts operated by Russians in Persian and Iranians discussing politics and geopolitics on platforms such as Instagram and X. The analysis of published content focused on narratives concerning the war in Ukraine, the war in Syria, the United States, and sanctions targeting Iran. The research timeframe, dictated by technological and logistical requirements, was 55 days, from 1 November to 25 December 2025. The selected material is substantial enough to allow for drawing reliable conclusions from its content analysis while remaining manageable within the author’s capacity. Moreover, the materials collected during this period hold the advantage of currency, which is particularly significant given the dynamic nature of the media landscape.

# Chapter 1.
# Russian Information Strategy in Iran

## 1.1. Theoretical Background

Russia's policy, including its disinformation strategy in the Middle East, extends beyond the region. It does not focus on a fragmented understanding or presentation of reality but instead forms part of Russia's global worldview and its comprehensive disinformation strategy. This strategy involves the simultaneous portrayal of the collective West as morally corrupt, weak, and in decline, alongside depicting the West (particularly the United States and the European Union) as an oppressive imperial force politically enslaving and economically exploiting Middle Eastern states and nations. Given that the Iranian government shares anti-Western resentment (Krzyżanowski, 2023 US), employs similar disinformation mechanisms to Russia (Nichols, 2024), and functions as an authoritarian state with frequent discord between the ruling authorities and the majority of the populace (Krzyżanowski, 2023), it is challenging to characterise Russia's disinformation strategy as "unfriendly" toward the Iranian government. On the contrary, the Russian and Iranian governments collaborate, jointly executing disinformation strategies targeted against the West and their respective domestic opposition. This cooperation is both deliberate and spontaneous, stemming from shared goals.

A significant aspect of Russian disinformation activity in Iran is that the primary focus of Russian disinformation efforts lies in the Arab world. This is because Arab states represent a region where Russia wields much weaker influence than Iran while maintaining stronger economic and political ties with the West. Consequently, Russia's disinformation activities directed explicitly at Iranians (i.e., in the Persian language) are far less intense than those aimed at Arabs. This necessitates carefully balancing narratives and skilful navigation to avoid taking a clear stance on contentious issues. Additionally, it is important to note that social media platforms serve as critical tools for influencing discourse in countries like Russia and Iran, where the opposition and society considerably lack unrestricted access to the political public sphere (Dehghan, Glazunova, 2021).

The narrative portraying the West as imperialists/colonisers and depicting Russia as an antidote to American hegemony[1] intensified with Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. Russia's policy in the Middle East, particularly in the case of Iran, is part of a

[1] An article from the Persian-language version of Sputnik is a classic example of this narrative: www.spnfa.ir/20241225/اقتدار-ایران-و-روسیه-و-چین-در-یا-هم-بودن-است-21118082.html

broader strategy to create an international order to protect Russia from Western interference in its internal affairs and guarantee its equality with the United States. In practice, this means that Russia's policy in the Middle East is subordinated to the Kremlin's global strategy towards Washington. In the Middle East, Moscow seeks to create a regional variant of what it considers the best model of international order, namely, a concert of powers that would include, in addition to Russia, regional powers such as Turkey and Iran, as well as the United States, provided the latter demonstrates a willingness to cooperate with Russia on equal terms and abandons its "hegemonic habits" (Nocetti, 2019).

The Russian (dis)information strategy in Iran and, more broadly, in the region serves as a tool to strengthen and legitimise its regional profile while positioning itself domestically and globally as a rising power and an indispensable international actor, claiming the status of a great power comparable to the United States[2]. In line with these objectives, Russian information policy in Iran combines domestic, regional, and global dimensions.A key issue illustrating this phenomenon is the situation in Syria, where Russia and Iran closely cooperated in salvaging the rule of President Bashar al-Assad. Particularly regarding Syria, the reports from Russian state media have a dual purpose: domestically, they aim to legitimise the Kremlin's policy towards Syria, while internationally, Russia seeks to impose its narrative on Middle Eastern geopolitics and position itself as an alternative to the West[3] (Nocetti, 2019). Materials from Sputnik Iran, the Persian version of RIA Novosti, and leading pro-Russian accounts on the X platform suggest the existence of an "alternative" vision of the Syrian conflict, in which Russia and Iran oppose the destructive actions of the United States[4]. To reinforce the validity of Russia's perspective on international policy and counter-dominant Western media narratives, Russian and Iranian propaganda align closely on this issue. The only notable difference in their narratives is the greater emphasis on religious themes in Iranian media. While the Russian narrative focuses on the defence of Christian holy sites (with Russia positioning itself as the protector of Christians in the region[5]) and the fight against "jihadist terrorists," the Iranian narrative concentrates on the defence of Shia holy sites and Shia communities[6].

Concerning Syria, Russian and Iranian media reports suggest that differing narratives are merely "points of view" of equal value. In most cases, they express the Russian government's position without any nuance: the war is perceived solely through the lens of

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2 www.mehrnews.com/news/6061526/آمریکا-تنها-مانده-است-غرب-از-ایرقدرت-شدن-روسیه-هراس-دارد
www.spnfa.ir/20231113/18610533--بازگشت-از-آن-دنیا-اعتراف-به-تبدیل-روسیه-به-یک-ایرقدرت-توسط-پوتین.html

3 spnfa.ir/20241207/21089176-هدف-سوریه-نیست-ایران-روسیه-و-چین-وکشورهای-عرب-منطقه-است.html

4 spnfa.ir/20241204/21085210-اوج-همکاری-گروه-های-تروریستی-در-سوریه-مشهود-است.html

5 fararu.com/fa/news/255118/نقش-کلیسای-ارتدوکس-روسیه-در-جنگ-سوریه

6 snn.ir/fa/news/1203264/حضور-ایران-در-سوریه-و-عراق-برای-دفاع-از-امنیت-و-مقدسات-بود
www.khabaronline.ir/news/2004813/رهبر-انقلاب-سردار-سلیمانی-ایران-را-هم-حرم-اطلاق-می-کرد-و-دفاع

the Syrian regime's counter-revolution against a "radical" opposition, composed mainly of "terrorists" funded and equipped from abroad to provoke regime change. The Syrian army is portrayed as a stabilising, patriotic, and disciplined force. At the same time, the rebels are reduced to roles as radical Islamists or mercenaries concealing their true motives behind democratic claims to deceive the supposedly gullible Western public. Numerous television and online reports also promote the idea of a "secular" Syria—presented as a bastion against jihadism (Nocetti, 2019).

Generally speaking, Russia's information strategy in Iran relies on strengthening its influence through manipulating narratives and promoting shared political interests, particularly in the context of anti-Western sentiments. Disinformation is key in building an alliance based on shared geopolitical goals, such as countering U.S. sanctions or stabilising the Middle East under conditions favourable to Moscow and Tehran. Russian activities in Iran focus on amplifying anti-American narratives, promoting the idea of a "declining West," and legitimising Russia's presence as Iran's strategic partner. Media outlets such as Sputnik and RT publish content tailored to local audiences, emphasising common threats, such as the "imperialist actions" of the United States (Repetowicz, 2022)[7].

[7] www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1403/09/18/3215145/روسیه-و-استفاده-از-راهبرد-ایران-در-مقابله-یا-تحریم
spnfa.ir/20241225/21118082-است-یودن-هم-یا-در-چین-و-روسیه-و-ایران-اقتدار.html

# Chapter 2.
# Political and Media Situation in the Country Under Study

## 2.1. Political Background

Iran's current form of governance results from the country's turbulent political history, revolutionary ethos, religious fervour, and philosophical reflection. Ideologically, the framework of Iranian politics is defined by the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*[8] created by Ayatollah Khomeini and the 1979 Constitution, along with its 1989 amendments. According to this framework, Iran is the Islamic Republic implementing the separation of powers; however, the ultimate authority in state governance is reserved for the rahbar, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution. The complex political system outlined in the constitution is essentially an experiment combining elements of modern Islamic theocracy with democracy and a presidential system. A network of unelected bodies controlled by the rahbar is theoretically balanced by the president and parliament, who the people elect. While the formal apparatus of the state is based on the constitution, Islam (in practice, its interpretation by the rahbar and a group of senior clerics), and the institutional structure of state offices, most of the political elite hold their positions due to personal relationships and connections within an informal web of family, business, and social dependencies. Individual politicians are often more influential than their formal status might suggest. The political process in Iran largely relies on informal networks of relationships among politicians, clerics, and business people. However, this does not mean public opinion and societal sentiments are irrelevant. The leadership style of the previous and current rahbar has been characterised by an effort to maintain a certain political balance while ensuring the supremacy of Shi'ism and the guiding role of the leader. This is particularly true for Ali Khamenei, who lacks the charisma and societal respect enjoyed by his predecessor. His position is both religiously sanctioned and paradoxically constrained by religion. Despite the authority he wields and the power he possesses, Khamenei must consider the opinions of other Shi'a clerics. Nonetheless, thanks to his powers, including the theoretical freedom to appoint key officials (e.g., the head of the judiciary and military commanders) and especially his control over the vast apparatus of religious foundations, he can suppress any oppositional tendencies among the clergy when necessary. The rahbar's sphere of authority is further extended by his official representatives stationed in all central and provincial offices. These representatives are authorised to intervene on behalf of the

[8] Velayat-e faqih is a politico-religious doctrine whose central premise is the necessity of establishing a state within which an Islamic society can function. The leader of such a state can only be a qualified cleric who serves as the country's highest political and religious authority.

leader in any state matter and, in some respects, wield more influence than ministers, for example.

The hybrid structure of the Iranian regime and its revolutionary roots have led to a political landscape characterised by ongoing ideological disputes between political factions and power struggles between elected institutions and those appointed by decree throughout most of the republic's more than forty-year existence. Added to this are conflicts between various interest groups. Although the rahbar occupies a decidedly dominant position, he is not an absolutist dictator but rather an autocrat, and the republic itself (despite its de facto oppressive nature) is based on the premise of at least minimal social consensus (Krzyżanowski, 2021).

Russian disinformation can exploit the political dispute between reformists and principlists over relations with the West, undermining the reformist narrative aimed at rapprochement with Western countries.

## Media Context

Iran's media system is highly centralised and state-controlled, a reflection of the theocratic nature of the Islamic Republic. The media in Iran serve a propagandistic role, acting as tools to promote Islamic values, legitimise authority, and counter foreign influences. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is the most essential institution overseeing media content, which holds a monopoly over television and radio and is directly supervised by the Supreme Leader (Semati, 2011).

Legal regulations impose strict limitations on media activities. The Press Law of 1986 allows for the closure of newspapers and the arrest of journalists for content deemed contrary to Islamic principles or national interests. As a result, most news outlets avoid topics that could undermine the clergy's authority or the country's foreign policy. A strong presence of pro-government outlets and minimal space for independent journalism also characterises Iran's media system. For example, newspapers like Kayhan promote government positions, while opposition publications are marginalised and often operate in exile. Although the internet is widely accessible, it is heavily censored through filtering and blocking content, making independent information exchange difficult. At the same time, social media platforms like Telegram and Instagram have become vital communication channels for young Iranians and the opposition. However, authorities block access to these platforms during political crises to limit social mobilisation. For instance, during the fuel protests in 2019, the government shut down the internet nationwide for two days. In the following two days, only Iranian websites were accessible, and VPNs were rendered inoperative - it was experienced by the author of this text firsthand. Iran's media system is

closely linked to the country's foreign policy. International channels like Press TV promote anti-Western narratives to portray Iran as an independent leader of the Muslim world (Semati, 2011).

In conclusion, Iran's media system is tightly controlled by the state, restricting pluralism and freedom of speech. However, the growth of digital technologies and increasing social dissatisfaction suggest the potential emergence of alternative information sources in the future.

Public trust in media in Iran is low, stemming from the long-standing subordination of media content to state authorities and restrictions on freedom of speech. In the context of the theocratic political system, Iranian media primarily serve a propagandistic function, leading the public to view them as tools of control and manipulation rather than reliable sources of information (Semati, 2011). A key factor undermining trust is the aforementioned monopoly of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) over radio and television content. IRIB promotes one-sided narratives supporting the government and the Supreme Leader while ignoring social issues such as corruption and repression of the opposition. This approach has driven many Iranians to seek information from independent online media and social media platforms (Hashemzadegan, 2022). According to research conducted in 2023, only 32% of Iranians report trusting the information provided by state media. Trust levels are even lower in urban areas, particularly among young people, who prefer foreign media or independent digital platforms such as Telegram and Instagram (IIN, 2024). The growing popularity of these media outlets is also due to their ability to bypass state censorship and provide content that addresses social needs. In recent years, protests against the government have significantly impacted public trust in the media. State media were widely criticised for ignoring or falsifying reports about demonstrations. As a result, many citizens have come to view IRIB as an unreliable source, deepening the crisis of trust (Semati, 2011; IIN, 2024; Abdi, 2024). However, some segments of the population still rely on state media, particularly in rural areas where internet access is limited and alternative sources of information are less available.

In conclusion, public trust in media in Iran is low and continues to decline as independent online sources gain popularity. Reversing this trend would require fundamental reforms in the media system, including greater pluralism and freedom of speech.

# Chapter 3.
## Tools and Techniques of Disinformation Used by Russia in Iran

Russia employs a variety of tools and techniques of disinformation in Iran to achieve its strategic objectives, such as strengthening its influence in the region, undermining the West's position, and building a lasting alliance with Tehran. Moscow's disinformation operations rely on advanced strategies that integrate technological, cultural, and political elements tailored to the specific characteristics of Iranian society and its media system.
One of the primary tools is Russian media outlets such as Sputnik, which broadcast content in languages adapted to audiences in Iran. These media propagate narratives reinforcing shared political objectives, such as criticism of U.S. sanctions[9], opposition to NATO, and promoting anti-Western values. However, Russia primarily leverages social media as a key channel for distributing disinformation. By employing bots and troll farms, Moscow amplifies anti-American and anti-Israeli narratives, which resonate strongly within Iran's conservative society. Platforms such as Telegram and Instagram, widely popular in Iran, serve as arenas for intensive campaigns that not only spread disinformation but also aim to influence public sentiment, reinforcing Iran's isolation from the West (Hashemzadegan, 2022).

Another technique is historical and cultural manipulation. Russia often invokes shared experiences of Iran and Russia in resisting Western imperialism, referencing historical events such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This approach helps construct narratives of shared interests and threats, fostering pro-Russian attitudes within Iranian society (Semati, 2011). Notably, Russia must also contend with historical conflicts, particularly the Soviet occupation of northern Iran, which ended in 1946. Opponents of closer Russo-Iranian ties point to issues such as Russian delays and manipulations in constructing Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, delays in delivering S-300 air defence systems ordered by Iran, and the undelivered SU-35 fighter jets[10].

[9] spnfa.ir/20241227/21121440-خسته-شدن-مردم-کشورهای-غربی-از-سیاست-تحریم-ها.html
spnfa.ir/20241112/21049730-اتصال-شبکه-میر-روسیه-به-شبکه-شتاب-ایران-چه-مزیتی-دارد.html

[10] donya-e-eqtesad.com/بخش-سایت-خوان-62/4117709-علت-امتناع-روسیه-از-عدم-تحویز-ایران-به-سوخو

Russia is also actively involved in disinformation regarding Iran's nuclear programme, often emphasising Moscow's support for Iran's right to develop nuclear energy while portraying the West as the primary instigator of tensions in the region[11]. These efforts aim to strengthen technological cooperation between Russia and Iran while deepening Iran's mistrust of Western countries. An important element of Russia's disinformation strategy is undermining the credibility of independent media and non-governmental organisations operating within Iran's informational sphere (not necessarily on Iranian territory). Russian narratives frequently depict these institutions as "Western puppets" or tools of foreign intelligence services, which weakens their ability to inform the public about the country's real issues.

In conclusion, the tools and techniques of disinformation employed by Russia in Iran are comprehensive, encompassing both traditional media and modern digital technologies. These efforts aim to build a strategic partnership with Tehran and weaken Western influence in the region.

[11] www.isna.ir/news/1403100503961/روسیه-گروسی-درباره-ایران-رویکرد-بی-طرفانه-داشته-باشد

# Chapter 4.
# Analysis of the Effects of Disinformation

## 4.1. Political Effects of Disinformation

Due to the tactical alliance between the two countries, Russian disinformation has a limited direct impact on Iran's political stability. However, it introduces dynamics reinforcing authoritarian governance and undermining internal social cohesion. One key consequence is the further intensification of anti-Western sentiments, which Russia skilfully amplifies by promoting narratives about "imperialist threats" from the United States and NATO. Such messages help legitimise the Iranian government's policies towards the West, including its nuclear programme and its approach to stringent economic sanctions while weakening pro-democracy movements advocating for the liberalisation of Iran's foreign policy.

Russian disinformation also destabilises Iran's informational space, eroding public trust. The dissemination of contradictory information fosters social disorientation and hampers citizens' ability to verify the accuracy of information. These actions deepen divisions between various social groups and weaken their ability to advocate for democratic reforms collectively. Another significant aspect is the reinforcement of Iran's authoritarian governance model by promoting narratives favourable to the regime. Russia advocates ideas that present authoritarian cooperation as an effective alternative to Western democracies. Such efforts assist Iranian authorities in suppressing opposition movements while undermining democratic ideals and human rights (Semati, 2011). However, Russian disinformation also leads to tensions within Iran's ruling elites, particularly between proponents of close cooperation with Russia and groups more sceptical of its influence (Morandi, 2024). In the long term, Russian disinformation may contribute to keeping Iran in a state of political isolation, limiting opportunities for internal reforms and strengthening ties with the West. By propagating anti-Western narratives, Russia traps Iranian elites in a "fortress under siege" strategy, exacerbating the country's economic and social crises.

In summary, Russian disinformation influences the maintenance of Iran's authoritarian governance model while exacerbating social and political divisions. In this way, Russia furthers its interests in the region at the expense of Iran's internal political stability, even though Russian disinformation efforts do not decisively impact Iran's overall situation.

# 4.2. Social Effects of Disinformation

Through deliberate narrative manipulation, Moscow seeks to influence Iranian society, creating an environment conducive to Russia's strategic interests in the region.

### Influence on Political Issues

In the political sphere, Russian disinformation focuses on reinforcing anti-Western sentiments. State-controlled Russian media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, intentionally promote narratives that depict the United States and the West as the primary threats to Iran's sovereignty. An example is the media campaign surrounding economic sanctions, in which Russia portrays itself as a "solidarity partner" in the fight against Western domination (Rahimi, 2015). These narratives help legitimise Iran's isolationist policies and weaken public support for cooperation with the West. In Iran, a long-standing political divide exists between government supporters, including hardline conservatives, and the opposition, which advocates for greater civil liberties, reforms, and reduced influence of state religious institutions on politics. Russian disinformation exacerbates these divisions by promoting narratives that deepen antagonisms. By manipulating information about Western interventions in the region, Russia portrays the United States and its allies as threats to Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity, bolstering isolationist tendencies among conservatives. In this context, disinformation supports the government's narrative of an "external threat," which helps legitimise the authoritarian regime and hinders democratic reforms. Russian disinformation also targets more open, pro-Western segments of Iranian society, portraying their actions as "serving foreign interests" and "harmful to national values." Such manipulation can lead to the opposition being perceived by some social groups as treacherous and lacking national spirit, intensifying polarisation and weakening reformist movements.

### Influence on Religious Issues

In the religious sphere, Russian disinformation skilfully exploits divisions within the Islamic world. Moscow supports narratives that highlight shared interests between Shiites and Orthodox Christians in opposition to "Western imperialism" and Sunni extremism (Semati, 2011). Russia also manipulates issues related to the conflict in Syria, portraying its presence as a means of protecting religious minorities, which resonates with the beliefs of many Iranians. This approach strengthens the perception of Russia as Iran's "natural ally" in defending religious values while depicting the "corrupt and decadent West" as a natural adversary.

Concluding: Russian disinformation impacts Iranian society on multiple levels, from politics to religious issues and national identity. By promoting anti-Western narratives, manipulating religious and national conflicts, and undermining civil society, Moscow aims to weaken Iranian civic structures and reinforce an authoritarian model of governance. These actions advance Russia's short-term interests in the region but simultaneously deepen internal divisions and contribute to political destabilisation in Iran.

## 4.3. International/Regional Consequences

Russian disinformation efforts in Iran have a limited but significant impact on international relations, particularly in regional conflicts and power rivalries. By disseminating narratives aligned with its interests, Russia seeks to strengthen its influence in the Middle East and shape Iranian society's and political elites' perceptions of the West (Rodkiewicz, 2020). This disinformation includes undermining trust in the United States, fuelling anti-American sentiments, and propagating conspiracy theories related to sanctions imposed on Iran (Weiss, 2021). Russian disinformation campaigns also influence perceptions of regional conflicts, such as the war in Syria, where Iran and Russia cooperate to protect Assad's regime (Tan, 2022). Through these efforts, the Kremlin aims to bolster its strategic partnership with Tehran while simultaneously reducing U.S. influence in the region. These actions destabilise international dialogue and complicate cooperation on global issues, such as Iran's nuclear programme. Russia's information campaigns in Iran also reinforce its position as a " necessary ally," further complicating efforts to develop a cohesive international policy towards Tehran. Consequently, this leads to the escalation of geopolitical tensions and the deepening of regional polarisation (Galeeva, 2024).

In Iran-U.S. relations, the Kremlin's disinformation focuses on weakening U.S. influence in the Middle East. Narratives suggesting that the U.S. is planning military provocations against Iran are popularised, thereby supporting anti-American sentiments among the Iranian public and strengthening the regime's stance against the West. Additionally, Russia seeks to present itself as Iran's ally in the face of "Western imperialism," marginalising the role of the United States in peace processes and nuclear negotiations.

In Iran-EU relations, Russian disinformation efforts aim to create divisions among EU member states. The Kremlin fuels controversies surrounding sanctions imposed on Iran, promoting narratives about Europe's "selfishness" and its dependence on the U.S. As a result, the coherence of EU policy towards Iran is undermined, especially concerning the nuclear agreement (JCPOA). Russia attempts to bring Iran closer to itself economically and politically, diminishing the significance of European partnerships in the region.

In the Middle East, Russian disinformation exacerbates divisions between Iran and its regional rivals, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel. Narratives are spread, suggesting that the U.S. seeks to create a coalition against Iran, which leads to increased mistrust between states. In this way, Russia tries to weaken U.S. influence in the Middle East while presenting itself as a "neutral mediator" capable of stabilising the region (Rumer, 2024).

In summary, Russian disinformation efforts lead to heightened tensions between Iran and the U.S., the EU, and Middle Eastern states. The result is hindered international dialogue, escalated regional conflicts, and strengthened Russian influence at the expense of global stability; however, Russia's impact on these tensions is not decisive.

# Chapter 5.
# Strategies for Countering Disinformation

Countering Russian disinformation in Iran requires multidimensional actions at both national and international levels, incorporating education, technology, and political cooperation. **Here are several key recommendations:**

### Raising Public Awareness

It is essential to educate Iranian society on identifying false information. Implementing online media literacy programmes can help citizens understand how disinformation operates and how to verify sources.

### Cooperation with Independent Media and the Opposition

In Iran, where the government largely controls media, support for independent journalists and foreign news services can contribute to debunking Russian narratives. Although targeted by the government, international media organisations such as BBC Persian or Radio Farda play an important role in delivering reliable information. However, these outlets can be easily discredited as being anti-Iranian (e.g., "opposed to the Islamic Republic") and accused of being influenced by the diaspora. Labels such as monarchist sympathisers or ties to the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK) often lead to their delegitimisation. A potential remedy could involve establishing a new, independent news agency unassociated with the Iranian diaspora and capable of delivering impartial and credible information.

### Verification of Information and Fact-Checking

Creating platforms for rapid information verification, known as fact-checking, is an effective method to combat disinformation. Media-monitoring organisations can track and expose false narratives from Russian sources while presenting alternative, fact-based explanations. Grassroots associations of Iranians outside Iran could primarily serve as the main executors of such efforts. Currently, there is no dedicated structure for combating disinformation, which significantly hampers the ability to counter the harm caused by Russian propaganda activities.

### Promoting Alternative Narratives

Providing Iranian audiences with reliable and engaging alternative narratives is crucial. Collaboration with regional allies and international organisations can effectively neutralise Russian propaganda by showcasing positive examples of economic and political cooperation with the West. Launching an EU-funded programme targeted at NGOs working in civic education and media could enable an effective response to Russian disinformation.

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Given the significant emphasis Russia places on narratives about the threat from NATO—one of the main themes of Russian propaganda—it is essential to highlight Russian aggression and the crimes committed by Russian forces. Keeping Ukraine at the centre of the debate is critical in the current political climate. In Iranian media discourse, public discussions on the Russian invasion often barely address Ukraine. Instead, they focus on Western colonialism, globalisation, and other broad geopolitical topics. Presenting the Ukrainian perspective (partly the strictly Polish one) could weaken the impact of Russia's narrative.

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