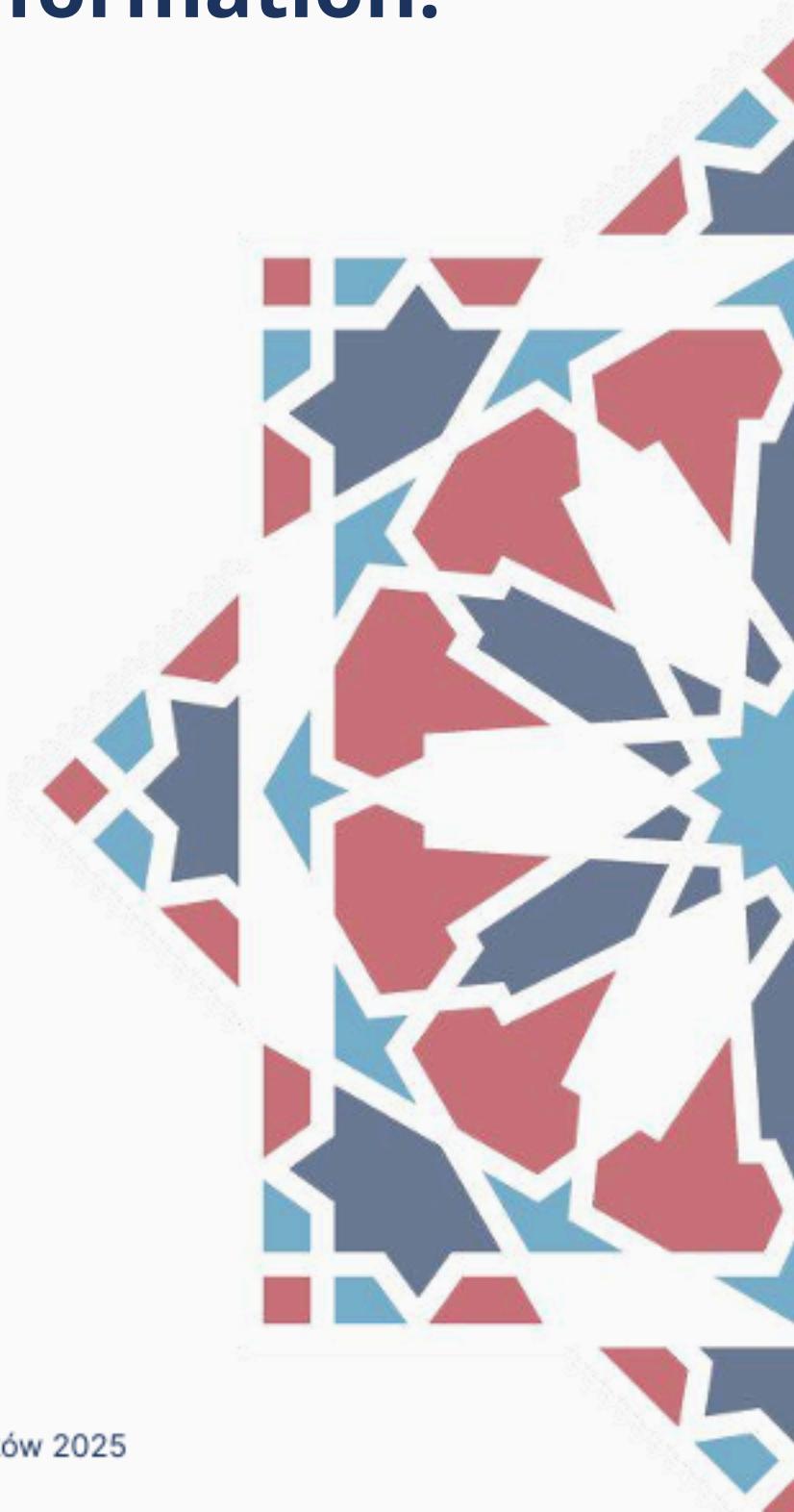




Report

Imported Disinformation: Russian State and Non-State Channels in Pakistan



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About the project



Instytut Badań
nad Turcją



Disinformation
in MENAT



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Introduction

The aim of this report is to identify Russian disinformation in Pakistan—the second-largest country in South Asia, an “ideological” state threatened by terrorism, and simultaneously a geopolitically crucial nuclear power[1]. Pakistan is not a priority within Russia’s broader foreign policy strategy towards Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific, often called the “Pivot to Asia”. However, Pakistan’s importance to Kremlin policy increased after 2022 because of: (i) Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the resulting isolation of Moscow by the West, and (ii) the cautious warming of relations between Islamabad and Moscow, shaped by the sensitive geopolitical environment of South Asia. In this volatile regional landscape, trilateral dynamics between Pakistan and Russia’s strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific—the China and India (the China–India–Pakistan triangle)—remain vital. Islamabad’s “all-weather friendship” with Beijing—its term for a deep, multifaceted partnership—along with its long-standing territorial conflict with India over Kashmir since the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent, creates an environment where Russian narratives can be amplified or exploited. Given its domestic and external conditions—as will be shown—Pakistan is a strategically important yet vulnerable target for Russian disinformation. Because Russia–Pakistan relations have developed significantly in recent years, this report focuses on the period 2022–2025. It draws on content from traditional and social media, diplomatic communications, and official government documents. Attribution is approached cautiously: material is classified as “Russian” if it originates from official channels of the Russian Federation or faithfully reproduces Kremlin messaging. Limitations of the study include restricted access to classified intelligence or private communications, incomplete platform transparency, and the likelihood of real-time changes in Pakistan’s information environment.

[1] Christophe Jaffrelot (ed.), *Pakistan at the Crossroads: Domestic Dynamics and External Pressures*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, „Introduction”, pp. 1–22.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Background: Russian Information Strategy

Most definitions consistently highlight that disinformation involves the intentional spread of false information aimed at misleading the recipient, often concerning political, religious, or ideological topics[2]. Moscow utilises disinformation in this manner as part of its broader hybrid warfare and information warfare strategies.

The primary objectives of Russian disinformation include:

- Destabilising and undermining Western unity by exacerbating divisions within the European Union and transatlantic relations, thereby complicating joint and coordinated responses to Russian actions[3].
- Encouraging anti-Western sentiment worldwide to challenge the U.S.- and EU-influenced rules-based international order.
- Influencing electoral outcomes and eroding trust in democratic processes through social media disinformation campaigns, online trolling, and the amplification of radical or extremist narratives[4].
- Legitimising Russian military interventions by depicting Russia as a “protector” of Russian-speaking populations (for example, in Ukraine) or a “stabilising force” (such as in Syria) [5];
- Building and consolidating influence in key regions, especially in the post-Soviet space, through the establishment of seemingly independent media outlets and NGOs financed by the Kremlin[6].

From a broader international relations perspective—i.e., beyond Russia-specific practices—disinformation acts as an instrument of sharp power, which aims to “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and informational environment of target states[7]”. Sharp power is generally employed by authoritarian states to influence democracies or the democratic elements of hybrid regimes, especially within the context of information warfare. Due to the lack of a consistent definition of disinformation and its frequent association with Russia, similar tools used in Pakistan by China are more precisely described as propaganda, political messaging, or—when deliberately presented as such—forms of soft power[8]. The Chinese dimension is especially significant because of the strong synergy between Russian and Chinese disinformation content, particularly concerning the war in Ukraine and the West. Within the strategic, economic, and political framework of the “all-weather” China–Pakistan partnership, this synergy can aid Russian disinformation efforts to influence the Pakistani public—particularly if Moscow utilises channels, formats, tools, and narratives already successfully tested by Beijing. Although Pakistan is not a primary theatre for Russia’s hybrid and information warfare—conducted in parallel with its broader pivot to Asia—its importance has grown since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In June 2023, “neutral” Pakistan began importing Russian oil (see Graphic 1), signaling a tangible rapprochement along the Moscow–Islamabad axis.

[2] Don Fallis, „What Is Disinformation?”, *Library Trends* 63, no. 3, 2015, doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014 (accessed: 4 September 2025).

[3] Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, Kinga Raś, „Rosyjskie zagrożenia hybrydowe dla państw bałtyckich”, 2017, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Rosyjskie_zagro_enia_hybrydowe_dla_pa_stw_ba_tyckich (accessed: 4 September 2025).

[4] Timothy L. Thomas, „Russia’s 21st Century Information War: Working to Undermine and Destabilize Populations”, NATO StratComCOE, 2015, https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/timothy_thomas.pdf (accessed: 4 September 2025).

[5] Keir Giles, Russia’s ‘New’ Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/03/russias-new-tools-confronting-west-continuity-and-innovation-moscos-exercise-power> (accessed: 4 September 2025).

[6] Andrzej Dąbrowski, Agnieszka Legucka, „Media jako ‘zagraniczni agenci’ w USA i Rosji: implikacje dla relacji dwustronnych i współpracy międzynarodowej”, PISM, <https://pism.pl/upload/images/artykuly/legacy/files/23951.pdf> (accessed: 4 September 2025).

[7] Christopher Walker, Jessica Ludwig (eds.), *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, National Endowment for Democracy, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-NED-December-2017.pdf> (accessed: 4 September 2025).

[8] Agnieszka Nitza-Makowska, „Can the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor help Beijing win Pakistanis’ hearts and minds? Reviewing higher education as an instrument of Chinese soft power in Pakistan”, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 28(3), 2022, p. 274–289, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2021.1962849> (accessed: 4 September 2025).



Shehbaz Sharif 
@CMShehbaz

I have fulfilled another of my promises to the nation. Glad to announce that the first Russian discounted crude oil cargo has arrived in Karachi and will begin oil discharge tomorrow.

Today is a transformative day. We are moving one step at a time toward prosperity, economic growth and energy security & affordability.

This is the first ever Russian oil cargo to Pakistan and the beginning of a new relationship between Pakistan and Russian Federation.

I commend all those who remained part of this national endeavor & contributed to translating the promise of Russian oil import into reality.

Przetłumacz wpis

5:23 PM · 11 cze 2023 · 3,2 min wyświetleń

2 tys. 1 tys. 6 tys. 48

Russian oil. Source: Shehbaz Sharif, Twitter (X), <https://x.com/cmshehbaz> (accessed: 4 September 2025).

The official narrative promoted in Islamabad—exemplified by Prime Minister Sharif's post—highlights the advantages of closer ties with Moscow, framing them as beneficial for Pakistan's economic growth and energy security. This suggests that Pakistan, viewing its relationship with Russia mainly in terms of short-term economic benefits, may create a receptive environment for Russian disinformation.

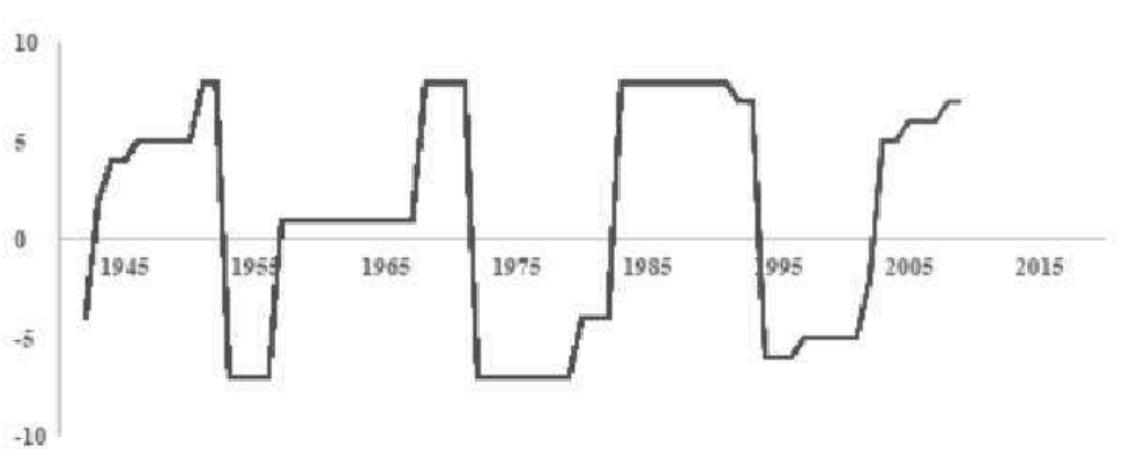
Chapter 2

Political and Media Situation in Pakistan

2.1. Political Background

The leading global democracy ranking—the Democracy Index—published in February 2025—classifies Pakistan as an authoritarian state[9]. Since the first edition of the index in 2006, Pakistan has been categorised as a hybrid regime combining elements of autocracy and democracy. By the mid-2020s, Pakistan's internal political dynamics were shaped by two seemingly contradictory processes. The first involves the capture of the state—including key policy areas—by the military-intelligence establishment (the army, Inter-Services Intelligence – ISI, and affiliated networks). This process has resulted in a persistent imbalance of power favouring the military-intelligence apparatus over civilian authorities. Although Pakistan's last military dictatorship, under General Pervez Musharraf, formally ended in 2008, the dominance of the military-intelligence establishment has persisted. The second process, relatively new, can be described as façade democratization. Since 2008, Pakistan has held regular elections, yet representatives elected by the public do not make independent decisions in areas crucial to the state's survival[10]. Historically and currently, a government remains in power only as long as it retains the approval of the military-intelligence establishment.

These conditions have generated a volatile pattern of regime change (Graphic 2), characterised by coups, military dictatorships, and sudden democratic setbacks, leaving Pakistan a fragile state with an unsettled democracy and a persistent civilian–military imbalance.



Graphic 2: Pakistan's Regime Trajectory (1947–2014): -10 to -6 – Autocracy; -5 to 0 – Closed Anocracy; 1 to 5 – Open Anocracy; 6 to 9 – Democracy; 10 – Full Democracy.

Source: The Center for Systemic Peace, Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2013, Country Report – Pakistan <https://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/pak2.htm> (accessed: 4 September 2025)

[9] Democracy Index 2024, Economist Intelligence, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/#mktoForm_anchor (accessed: 4 September 2025).

[10] Agnieszka Nitza-Makowska, „Pakistan – nierównowaga kontroli między establishmentem militarno-wywiażdżyczym a cywilnym i fasadową demokratyzacją”, „Studia Politologiczne”, vol. 55 (2020), p. 381–395, (accessed: 4 September 2025).

The features of the Pakistani regime described above create conducive conditions for Russian disinformation. Increased state control—which intensifies as the political system diverges further from democracy, as is common in authoritarian regimes—can paradoxically restrict official Russian channels while simultaneously directing messaging into informal networks, where it spreads more swiftly and with less oversight.

2.2. Main Political Forces

The imbalance of power in Pakistan persists regardless of the political regime or ruling party. In the recent elections for the National Assembly (NA), Pakistan's lower house of Parliament, held on 8 February 2024, no political party secured a majority. The highest number of seats in single-member constituencies was won by independent candidates affiliated with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which had been banned before the elections; these candidates later joined the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) coalition. Among political parties, the Pakistan Muslim League—Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) secured the most seats and, together with several smaller parties, formed a governing coalition (Graphic 3).

Full name (original)	Abbreviation	Number of seats in the NA*	Ideology
Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)	PML-N	123	Conservatism, center-right, economic liberalism, developmentalism
Pakistan Peoples Party	PPP	74	Social democracy, center-left, progressivism
Muttahida Qaumi Movement – Pakistan	MQM-P	22	Muhajir nationalism, secularism, social liberalism

Pakistan Muslim League (Q)	PML-Q	5	Conservatism, center-right, pro-business
Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party	IPP	4	Centrist, pragmatic, pro-economic reforms
Balochistan Awami Party	BAP	1	Baloch regionalism, centrism, federalism
National Party	NP	1	Baloch nationalism, social democracy, secularism
Pakistan Muslim League (Z)	PML-Z	1	Conservatism, right-wing
Sunni Ittehad Council	SIC	80	Barelwī Islamism, social conservatism; parliamentary group affiliated with PTI
Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F)	JUI-F	10	Deobandi Islamism, religious conservatism
Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen	MWM	1	Shiite religious-political movement, Islamism
Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party	PkMAP	1	Pashtun nationalism, social democracy, secularism, federalism

Balochistan National Party (Mengal)	BNP-M	1	Baloch nationalism, social democracy, regionalism
Independents	Indep.	5	diverse

*The seat numbers shown reflect the distribution after reserved seats were allocated in spring 2024 and may have changed since.

Graphic 3: Political Parties in Pakistan's National Assembly.

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), General Election 2024, <https://ecp.gov.pk/general-elections-2024> (accessed: 4 September 2025).

2.3. Political Divisions

The Pakistani political landscape after the 2024 elections remains highly polarised across multiple intersecting lines.

Axis 1: PTI versus the coalition camp (PML-N, PPP, and allied parties).

This division stems from the circumstances of the 2024 elections. After the Supreme Court revoked PTI's "cricket bat" symbol on 13 January 2024, PTI-affiliated candidates were compelled to run as independents, while governance was ultimately secured by the coalition, with Shehbaz Sharif elected Prime Minister on 3 March 2024. These electoral developments sparked a dispute over legitimacy: PTI emphasises its strong social mandate and mobilisation of younger voters, whereas the coalition stresses its formally confirmed parliamentary majority, validated by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and the courts. Relevant to this report—and central to the confrontation between the ruling coalition and PTI—is Imran Khan's official visit to Moscow in February 2022, coinciding with the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. There is, however, no evidence that this visit "triggered" a coordinated Kremlin disinformation campaign in Pakistan. Rather, the visit became a narrative anchor frequently utilised by Russian and pro-Russian outlets in their messaging (e.g., Russia Today; RT and Sputnik amplified claims of U.S. pressure and portrayed Islamabad's subsequent stance as "neutral"). Simultaneously, Khan's removal from office through a no-confidence vote fuelled domestic narratives about alleged U.S. interference—claims denied by Washington—which created conducive conditions for amplifying such narratives. In other words, while there was a temporal coincidence and opportunistic exploitation of the visit by Russian messaging during the invasion, there is no evidence of a direct causal link.

Axis 2: Regional–ethnic structure of "territorial electorates."

The map of political competition is further shaped by Pakistan's administrative and ethno-linguistic landscape. The country comprises four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan) as well as the Islamabad Capital Territory. Additionally, Islamabad administers Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan—entities whose status is linked to the dispute with India over Kashmir and which are not officially recognised as provinces. Voting preferences largely mirror this ethno-linguistic mosaic, reinforcing traditional strongholds: PML-N in Punjab, PPP in Sindh, MQM-P in urban Sindh, and JUI-F in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

*Axis 3: Islamist Groups

Operating outside the political mainstream is the Islamist movement Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which is capable of mobilising large segments of society for mass protests and short-term nationwide blockades by invoking narratives of “defending religious sanctity” and promoting anti-Western rhetoric[11].

Axis 4: Demography and the “Youth Vote”

Young voters—over 56 million eligible in 2024—and PTI’s strong appeal among first-time voters and relatively better-educated segments of society amplify generational tensions and wider debates about Pakistan’s political future. At the same time, low trust in the electoral process undermines confidence in election results[12].

The clash between PTI and the ruling coalition, along with deep-rooted provincial and ethnic divisions and the presence of religious protest movements, combined with the structural imbalance between the military-intelligence establishment and civilian institutions, creates fertile ground for foreign narratives, including Russian ones, particularly those undermining elections and spreading anti-Western messages.

2.4. Social Divisions

Pakistan’s deeply rooted social, cultural, and ethno-linguistic cleavages present opportunities for Russian disinformation and influence operations by other external actors. The most significant divisions concern:

- Income, Poverty, and Social Class.
- Following the inflationary and flood crises of 2022, poverty (measured at USD 3.65/day) increased to approximately 42.3%[13].
- Centre–Periphery (Regional Disparities).
- Punjab and Sindh remain more developed than Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which face persistent deficits in infrastructure, public services, and security. In 2024, the vast majority of terrorist incidents and attacks occurred in these less-developed regions[14].
- Educational and Digital Divisions.
- Literacy in Pakistan is 60.7%, with notable gender and regional disparities across provinces. Outside formal schooling (ages 5–16), 25.4 million children are not in school[15]. Internet penetration is estimated at around 45–46%, with roughly 116 million users by early 2025[16].
- Ethno-Linguistic Divisions. According to the 2023 census, the most widely spoken native languages are Punjabi (37.0%), Pashto (18.1%), Sindhi (14.3%), Saraiki (12.0%), Urdu (9.3%), Balochi (3.4%), and Hindko (2.3%). Ethnic polarisation is especially evident in major urban centres such as Karachi and along internal migration routes[17].

[11] International Crisis Group, A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan, Asia Report N°327, 5 September 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/327%20Pakistan%20-%20Sectarian%20Violence%20-%20Print.pdf> (accessed: 04 September 2025); Niha Dagia, „Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan Again Signals its Street Power”, The Diplomat, 25.10.2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/tehreek-e-labbaik-pakistan-again-signals-its-street-power> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[12] Elections 2024: Parties race to woo key youth voters, The Express Tribune, 02.02.2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2455269/elections-2024-parties-race-to-woo-key-youth-voters?> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[13] World Bank, The World Bank in Pakistan, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pakistan/overview> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[14] Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Pakistan Security Report 2024: An Abridged Version, 2025, https://www.pakips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Overview_PIPS-Security-Report-2024.pdf (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[15] Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Literacy Rate, Enrolment and out of School Population by Sex and Rural/Urban, Census-2023, https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_12_national.pdf (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[16] DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, Digital 2025: Pakistan, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-pakistan> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[17] Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), Table 11: Population by Mother Tongue, Sex and Rural/Urban (Census 2023), https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_11_national.pdf (accessed: 04 September 2025).

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- Religious Divisions. The vast majority of Pakistanis are Muslims (96.35%). The largest minority groups are Christians (1.37%) and Hindus (1.61%)[19]. Sunni Islam is dominant, while Shia Muslims are estimated to make up around 10–15% of the Muslim population (no official census data exists). Social tensions periodically flare up around blasphemy-related issues. Pakistan's blasphemy laws—such as life imprisonment for defaming Islam and the death penalty for insulting the Prophet—are sometimes exploited as tools of manipulation or personal retaliation, including against minority communities[20].

From the perspective of Russian disinformation operations, these social divisions are highly significant. In conditions of widespread poverty, narratives such as anti-IMF messaging or promises of affordable Russian energy can gain substantial support. Educational and digital disparities enable the rapid spread of short-form content, increasing vulnerability to deepfakes and pseudo-expertise. Religious divisions can be exploited to promote anti-Western narratives, which particularly resonate with conservative segments of Pakistani society that reject Western liberal values.

2.5. External Pressure

In the context of third-state activities—including Russian disinformation—it is important to emphasise that Pakistan faces significant external pressure from regional and international actors. According to the Fragile States Index, in the category of external intervention (which includes political and economic involvement, such as aid programmes), Pakistan scored 8.4/10, ranking 27th globally[21]. Russia does not hold a dominant position compared to China, India, or the United States. This vulnerability of the Islamic Republic to external players may, on the one hand, facilitate disinformation activities; on the other hand, it can complicate them, as Moscow's messaging competes with that of more influential nations.

[18] Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), Table 11: Population by Mother Tongue, Sex and Rural/Urban (Census 2023), https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/table_11_national.pdf (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[19] Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), Salient Features of Final Results Census-2017: Population distribution by religion (percentage), https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2017/salient_feature_census_2017.pdf (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[20] Omar Khan, "In The Name Of God: Problems With Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws," Cornell International Law Journal 19 January 2016, <https://publications.lawschool.cornell.edu/cilj/2016/01/19/in-the-name-of-god-problems-with-pakistans-blasphemy-laws> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[21] Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index 2024, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

Chapter 3

Media Context

3.1. Structure and Regulation of the System

The liberalisation of Pakistan's media landscape in 2002 and the establishment of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) were pivotal developments for the country's information environment. The online sphere, meanwhile, falls under the authority of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). State control over media content remains significant. In 2024, the government confirmed the blocking of the X platform (formerly Twitter), citing "national security," and in 2025 further regulatory restrictions on social media content were under consideration[22]. Additionally, government advertising is sometimes used as a leverage tool (e.g., withholding funds from critical outlets), a practice that disproportionately affects smaller and regional media[23].

In 2024, Freedom House rated Pakistan as "Not Free" (27/100) in its Freedom on the Net ranking. The assessment noted the blocking of internet platforms during election periods (including extended restrictions on X), suppression of virtual opposition rallies, and the enactment of restrictive legislation such as the E-Safety Bill and the Personal Data Protection Bill. The PTA also restricted content and websites without transparent procedures—for example, outlets affiliated with PTI[24].

Pakistan also ranked poorly in the 2025 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index (158/180). According to RSF, key factors undermining freedom of expression include the dominant role of the military in shaping media policy, the use of vague legal provisions to restrict speech, economic pressure through dependence on government advertising (leading to self-censorship), and widespread threats and violence against journalists combined with impunity for perpetrators[25].

The main sources of information in Pakistan are:

- Television continues to be the primary source of political and public affairs news. A few channels—Geo News, ARY, PTV News, and Samaa—account for over 60% of viewing figures (late 2018 data). According to Media Matters for Democracy, television remained the main medium for information during the COVID-19 pandemic, cited by 55% of respondents[26].
- Digital and social media continue to expand rapidly. In the first half of 2024, Pakistan had approximately 71.7 million active social media users. Platforms with the widest reach include YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Younger audiences, in particular, are increasingly relying on social media for information about current events[27].

[22] The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance, 2002 (Ordinance No. XIII of 2002), WIPO Lex, <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/15871> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[23] Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), The Precarious Path of Pakistan's Media Landscape: Navigating Freedom, Regulation and Sustainability, <https://pide.org.pk/research/the-precarious-path-of-pakistans-media-landscape-navigating-freedom-regulation-and-sustainability> (accessed: 04 September 2025); PIDE, The Precarious Path of Pakistan's Media Landscape: Navigating Freedom, Regulation and Sustainability, <https://file.pide.org.pk/pdfpideresearch/discourse-2024-01-01-state-control-corporate-interests-and-media.pdf> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[24] Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2024: Pakistan, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-net/2024> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[25] Reporters Without Borders (RSF), World Press Freedom Index – Pakistan, <https://rsf.org/en/country/pakistan> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[26] Nazam Maqbool, The Electronic Media Economy in Pakistan: Issues and Challenges (PIDE Knowledge Brief No. 2021:35, 13 August 2021), <https://file.pide.org.pk/uploads/kb-035-the-electronic-media-economy-in-pakistan-issues-and-challenges.pdf>, (accessed: 04 September 2025); Media Matters for Democracy, Public Trust in the Media during the Coronavirus Pandemic (31 December 2020), <https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MMfD-Public-Trust-Media-Covid-1.pdf> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[27] DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, Digital 2024: Pakistan, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-pakistan> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

3.2. The Role of State and Private Media

Pakistan's primary state-owned media include:

- PTV (public television, including PTV Parliament) – functions as a nationwide public broadcaster with regional programming.
- Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation / Radio Pakistan – the national radio network with exclusive access to distributing news.
- Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) – the state-owned news agency with nationwide coverage.

The private media landscape is led by several major groups, including Jang/Geo, ARY, Express, Dawn, Nawa-i-Waqt, Dunya, and Samaa. According to the Media Ownership Monitor, ownership concentration poses a medium-high to high risk: the eight largest owners collectively reach about 68% of audiences across television, radio, print, and online platforms. This structure enables political and business influence and restricts media plurality[28].

3.3. Public Trust in the Media

Public trust in the media has been declining in Pakistan. According to Gallup & Gilani Pakistan surveys, perceptions of media honesty and reliability dropped by 15 percentage points between 2010 and 2022[29]. A 2020 study by Media Matters for Democracy found that mainstream media were regarded as relatively credible during the pandemic, with 57% of respondents expressing trust in their coverage, while social media received the highest proportion of “unreliable” ratings (30%). These findings suggest that trust remains comparatively higher for television and print media than for social media platforms[30].

[28] Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) – Pakistan, Country page, <https://www.mom-gmr.org/en/countries/pakistan> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[29] Gallup & Gilani Pakistan, Gallup History Project, <https://www.gallup.com.pk/post/34832> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[30] Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD), Public Trust in the Media during the Coronavirus Pandemic (31 December 2020), <https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MMfD-Public-Trust-Media-Covid-1.pdf> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

Chapter 4

Tools and Techniques of Disinformation Employed by Russia

In Pakistan, the following Russian disinformation activities have been detected:

1. “Content laundering” through local media (content-sharing): spreading Russian state narratives into mainstream circulation via editorial collaborations.

In 2019, a content-sharing agreement was signed between Sputnik and the Pakistani newspaper The Nation (previously, Sputnik articles had also appeared on the newspaper’s website), allowing Russian narratives to enter Pakistan’s mainstream media space. In total, 5,535 articles credited to Sputnik were published on The Nation’s website[31]. These materials can be categorised according to the four primary objectives of Russian disinformation identified in this report. Below, each goal is listed alongside examples of articles that align with it.

Goal 1: Undermining Western unity and fostering anti-Western narratives

“US imposes sanctions on Iranian construction sector and materials linked to missile programme – Pompeo announces” — creates the image of the United States as an aggressor harming global stability more than the sanctioned states; endorses Moscow’s framing and undermines the legitimacy of coordinated Western sanctions[32].

Goal 2: Undermining trust in democratic and media processes in the West.

“Trump–Biden race... potential legal battles could decide the winner” — highlights the “fragility” of vote counting and legal disputes in the U. S .[33].

“How might the Capitol protests influence Trump’s prospects in the 2024 elections?’ — emphasises political turmoil and violence[34].

“Facebook likely won’t escape liability after blocking national news” — reinforces narratives of Big Tech “censorship” and control over information[35].

[31] The Nation, „Sputnik news agency partners with The Nation”, 25 February 2019, <https://www.nation.com.pk/news-source/news-source> (accessed: 04 September 2025); The Nation – „News Source”, <https://www.nation.com.pk/news-source/news-source> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[32] The Nation (Sputnik), „US sanctions Iranian construction sector, materials linked to missile program: Pompeo”, 01 November 2019, <https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Nov-2019/us-sanctions-iranian-construction-sector-materials-linked-to-missile-program-pompeo> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[33] The Nation (Sputnik), „Trump–Biden race prompts potential legal battles to determine the winner”, 04 November 2020, <https://www.nation.com.pk/04-Nov-2020/trump-biden-race-prompts-potential-legal-battles-to-determine-the-winner?> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[34] The Nation (Sputnik), „How could Capitol Hill protests affect Trump’s 2024 election chances?”, 09 January 2021, <https://www.nation.com.pk/09-Jan-2021/how-could-capitol-hill-protests-affect-trump-s-2024-election-chances> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[35] The Nation (Sputnik), „Facebook unlikely to get off with a whole skin after banning national news, UK observers say”, 22 February 2021, <https://www.nation.com.pk/22-Feb-2021/facebook-unlikely-to-get-off-with-a-whole-skin-after-banning-national-news-uk-observers-say> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

Goal 3: Legitimatising Russian military actions

“Russia is the only country with troops in Syria on a legal basis...,” statement by Peskov — portrays Russia’s presence in Syria as “legal,” suggesting that U.S. forces are contravening international law[36].

“Attempt by the U.S. army to block a Russian patrol in Syria constitutes a provocation’ — employs a narrative reversal by portraying Russia as the victim[37].

“NATO expansion to the East is unacceptable for Russia,” said Putin — framing Russian security claims as justified, thereby legitimising coercive policies[38].

Goal 4: Expanding influence in vital regions – advocating for a “multipolar world”

“The meeting in Moscow revives plans to hold direct talks with the Taliban regarding Afghanistan” — portrays Russia as an indispensable regional actor and a constructive partner for Pakistan and China[39].

2. Amplification through official accounts (digital diplomacy)

Russian embassies and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs manage coordinated social media platforms on X, Facebook, and Telegram that act as an “amplification network” to spread Kremlin-aligned narratives. The website of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan includes a dedicated section called Struggle Against Neocolonialism, which gathers anti-Western content consistent with official Russian messaging[40]. These include links to the White Books on Crimes of the Western States and their Allies, such as: Aftermath of Military Interventions by the United States and its European Allies; White Paper on Western States’ Violations of Human Rights Standards under the Pretext of Fighting Terrorism and Other Criminal Threats and Challenges; and The Discriminatory Nature of the Modern Global Monetary and Financial System[41]. The site also features interviews with senior Russian officials, including Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, aimed at discrediting the International Criminal Court[42].

[36] The Nation (Sputnik), „Kremlin responds to Erdogan’s Request that Russia ‘Step Aside’ in Syria”, 01 March 2020, <https://www.nation.com.pk/01-Mar-2020/kremlin-responds-to-erdogan-s-request-that-russia-step-aside-in-syria> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[37] The Nation (Sputnik), „US Army’s bid to block Russian patrol in Syria amounts to provocation: Russian ex-military diplomat”, 14 June 2020, <https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Jun-2020/us-army-s-bid-to-block-russian-patrol-in-syria-amounts-to-provocation-russian-ex-military-diplomat> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[38] The Nation (Sputnik), „NATO expansion to the East is unacceptable for Russia, Putin says”, 23 December 2021, <https://www.nation.com.pk/23-Dec-2021/nato-expansion-to-the-east-is-unacceptable-for-russia-putin-says> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[39] The Nation (Sputnik), „Moscow meeting revives plans to hold Taliban direct talks”, 13 November 2018, <https://www.nation.com.pk/13-Nov-2018/moscow-meeting-revives-plans-to-hold-taliban-direct-talks> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[40] Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Struggle against neocolonialism, <https://pakistan.mid.ru/en/news> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[41] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, White Books on Crimes of the Western states and their allies, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/belye_knigi (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[42] Dmitry Medvedev, „Lost Illusions, or How the International Criminal Court has become a Legal Nonentity”, Embassy of Russia in Pakistan, https://pakistan.mid.ru/en/news/lost_illusions_or_how_the_international_criminal_court_has_become_a_legal_nonentity_article_by_deput (accessed: 04 September 2025).

3. Fact-checking in the service of disinformation (simulated verification)

Kremlin-linked structures set up “anti-disinformation” initiatives that pretend to verify facts but actually endorse pro-Russian narratives. A notable example is the Global Fact-Checking Network (GFCN), announced in November 2024 and launched in April 2025. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), it is a “new propaganda tool” run by organisations connected to the Kremlin—including TASS, Dialog Regions, and the New Media School—designed to mimic fact-checking while spreading official Russian messages abroad[43]. The list of GFCN “experts” features Pakistani national Dr. Furqan Rao, whose involvement is documented during Global Digital Forum 2025 panels; he also displays this affiliation on his personal social media profiles. This demonstrates efforts to build personal and institutional influence networks in Pakistan[44].

4. Exploiting regulatory loopholes and platform restrictions

The blocking of X in Pakistan (since February 2024) has shifted public debate to platforms that are less regulated and harder to monitor, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube. These ecosystems favour rapid virality and minimal error correction. They also overlap with existing pro-Kremlin information structures: Telegram bot networks, coordinated channels, and accounts impersonating local users have been reported in Pakistan and similar information environments. Consequently, Pakistan’s X ban unintentionally facilitates the circulation, recycling, and mutation of pro-Russian narratives.

5. Operations on YouTube and short-form content; AI and deepfakes

Local studies (Digital Rights Foundation, DRF, 2023–2025) document the increasing use of generative AI, short-form videos, and deepfakes to fuel political, religious, and gender-based polarisation. This environment closely aligns with the communication formats favoured by Kremlin-linked actors[45]. YouTube Shorts and other short video platforms have become primary channels for emotionally charged political messaging in Pakistan. DRF research emphasises their use—alongside AI-generated deepfakes—for impersonation and manipulation during the 2024 elections, including fabricated content targeting female politicians. In this context, pro-Kremlin narratives do not need to develop their own distribution infrastructure. Instead, they can attach themselves to existing user behaviours: re-upload loops, meme templates, voice-over commentary, or pseudo-expert clips. These mechanisms make it easy to combine factual information (e.g., Pakistan’s purchases of Russian oil paid in Chinese renminbi) with broader Kremlin narratives about “sovereignty,” “Western hypocrisy,” or “the multipolar world.” In practice, this reinforces the message: Russia provides solutions; the West imposes restrictions—even when the original material is neutral economic reporting.

[43] Reporters Without Borders (RSF), „Russia: fact-checking is the Kremlin’s latest propaganda tool”, 24 June 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/russia-fact-checking-kremlins-latest-propaganda-tool> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[44] Furqan Rao (@FurqanRao1), X, <https://x.com/furqanrao1> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[45] Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), Platforms at the Polls: Disinformation, Political Ads & Platform Policies in Pakistan’s 2024 General Elections, 3 November 2024, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Platforms-at-the-Polls.pdf> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

Chapter 5

Analysis of the Effects of Disinformation

5.1. Political Effects of Disinformation

Russian narratives spreading during periods of electoral tension mainly serve to delegitimise: they reinforce beliefs in “external manipulation,” “imported governments,” and “Western conspiracies,” thus reducing public acceptance of election results and subsequent government decisions. Their direct influence on voter preferences remains limited; however, indirectly, they bolster political actors using anti-Western rhetoric, helping justify energy cooperation with Russia and facilitating foreign-policy “balancing” between competing great powers.

5.2. Social Effects of Disinformation

Russian disinformation exacerbates polarization and reinforces identity-based conflict narratives, such as religious, anti-Indian, and anti-Western themes. The primary dissemination platforms—YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook—facilitate swift spreads of misleading or decontextualised videos, undermining intergroup trust and normalising conspiracy theories. These processes lead to sporadic street protests driven by false information and create a hostile environment for journalists, researchers, and fact-checkers. Consequently, the space for meaningful discussion narrows, and public conversation becomes more susceptible to hate campaigns.

5.3. International / Regional Consequences

Russian information operations bolster narratives of Pakistan’s “anti-hegemonic neutrality,” potentially cooling relations with Western partners (such as the United States and the European Union). Regionally, these narratives align with the messaging advocating a multipolar international order, increasing acceptance of closer ties within the Russia–China–Pakistan triangle. This dynamic undermines Pakistan’s credibility as a predictable actor within Western-led coalitions and influences how Islamabad is perceived as a strategic partner.

Chapter 6

Strategies to Counter Disinformation

Legal Framework and Enforcement

A key element of government action on online content is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016, which authorises the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to block or remove “illegal content”[46]. The PTA utilises these powers extensively—for example, reporting the blocking of hundreds of thousands of URLs; in 2024, national media reported that over 1.25 million links had been blocked[47]. The same legal framework supported the restriction of access to X from February 2024, which authorities justified on security grounds.

In linear broadcasting (traditional TV and radio), PEMRA enforces financial penalties and temporary suspensions. Following legal amendments, maximum fines were increased, and the grounds for sanctions expanded to include “fake news” and “disinformation.” PEMRA guidelines now include prohibitions on broadcasting hate speech and require verification of “unverified” material[48].

Electoral Infrastructure

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) introduced a set of codes of conduct for the 2024 elections, covering the media, observers, political parties, and candidates. The ECP also established the Election Monitoring & Control Centre (EMCC) and issued disciplinary notices to editorial offices. In January–February 2024, the ECP formally urged PEMRA to take action against broadcasters violating the code and announced a separate code of conduct for “social media activists” reporting on the voting process[49].

Government Fact-Checking and Public Communication

Since 2018, the Federal Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MoIB) has maintained official “Fake News Buster” / “Fact Checker MoIB” profiles aimed at debunking viral falsehoods and alerting the public about misinformation[50].

[46] Government of Pakistan, The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (Act XL of 2016), [https://sja.gos.pk/assets/Updated_Laws/The%20Prevention%20of%20Electronic%20Crimes%20Act%2C%20Rules%20Final%20Index%20\(%20Upto%20date%202025\).pdf](https://sja.gos.pk/assets/Updated_Laws/The%20Prevention%20of%20Electronic%20Crimes%20Act%2C%20Rules%20Final%20Index%20(%20Upto%20date%202025).pdf) (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[47] Ishaq Tanoli, „Over 1.25m URLs blocked over objectionable content, PTA tells SHC”, 17.04.2024, Dawn, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1827920> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[48] Pakistan Advertisers Society (PAS), „PEMRA bans hate speech from Pakistani media channels”, <https://pas.org.pk/pemra-bans-hate-speech-from-pakistani-media-channels> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[49] Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF), „ECP urges Pemra to take action against media channels violating election code of conduct”, 2 January 2024, <https://pakistanpressfoundation.org/ecp-urges-pemra-to-take-action-against-media-channels-violating-election-code-of-conduct> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[50] Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (MoIB), Fact Checker / Fake News Buster, <https://www.moib.gov.pk/Pages/147/FactChecker> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

Social and Industry Initiatives

On the civil society front, specialised organisations monitor disinformation and offer training to newsrooms:

- Soch Fact Check – the sole IFCN Code signatory in Pakistan and recipient of the Global Fact-Check Fund; it publishes fact-checks and collaborates with platforms.
- Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) – developed the Journalists' Guide to Ethical Election Reporting (2023), which is widely used ahead of the 2024 elections[51].
- Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) conducts research on disinformation, including AI/deepfakes and election campaigns, and publishes reports on platform practices in Pakistan[52].
- International Media Support (IMS) – in 2023 outlined verification mechanisms in Pakistan and supported local newsrooms in developing fact-checking procedures[53].

Overall, Pakistan's mechanisms combine strict regulation (PECA/PTA, PEMRA), ECP electoral codes of conduct, government fact-checking, and the work of independent organisations. The state's approach prioritises control and platform restrictions—criticised at times for low transparency and risks of excessive censorship—while civil society offers “softer” solutions such as verification tools and newsroom standards.

[51] Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD), Journalists' Guide to Ethical Election Reporting, 11 December 2023, <https://mediamatters.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Resource-Pack-Journalists-Guide-to-Ethical-Election-Reporting.pdf> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[52] Digital Rights Monitor, „Pakistan's fledgling fact-checking industry struggles to gain footing”, <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/pakistans-fledgling-fact-checking-industry-struggles-to-gain-footing> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

[53] International Media Support (IMS), Countering Disinformation in Pakistan: Lessons and Recommendations for Digital Journalism (report), 19 January 2023, <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Countering-Disinformation-in-Pakistan-2023.pdf> (accessed: 04 September 2025).

Chapter 7

Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusions

Pakistan is a complex and fragile landscape of influence.

The mix of internal vulnerabilities—such as institutional weakness, ongoing civil–military tension, political polarisation, and economic pressure on the media—alongside external factors like regional tensions, reliance on external funding, and the geopolitical “lock” between India and China—creates an environment where short-lived, emotionally charged content—particularly videos—spreads more rapidly than corrections. The extended 2024 ban on X further shifted public debate to platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube, where the visibility of verification and corrections is significantly lower.

Russian influence manifests through three interconnected vectors.

- Content laundering – prolonged content-sharing between Sputnik and mainstream outlets (e.g., The Nation) has normalised pro-Russian narratives (anti-Western, “multipolar,” intervention-legitimising) and integrated them into the local mainstream.
- Digital diplomacy – embassy accounts (e.g., the Russian Embassy in Islamabad) amplify narratives through their websites and presence on X/Facebook/Telegram, including curated sections such as “Struggle Against Neocolonialism” and cycles of “White Books.”
- Verification imitations – initiatives such as the Global Fact-Checking Network (GFCN) utilise the symbolic authority of “fact-checking” to lend credibility to Kremlin-aligned narratives and build personal/institutional networks in the region.

Synergy with Chinese narratives reduces the barrier to acceptance.

Frames such as “multipolar world,” “Western hypocrisy,” and “economic sovereignty” (e.g., cheap Russian energy settled in RMB) closely align with China’s longstanding security and development discourse towards Islamabad. Consequently, Russian narratives seem less foreign and are often seen as an extension of already familiar Chinese arguments.

The outcome is delegitimisation and polarisation.

In moments of political tension (elections, India–Pakistan crises), Russian messaging reinforces claims of “foreign manipulation,” portrays the West as hostile, and highlights the “better offer from the East.” This encourages questioning of institutions, intensifies identity-based divisions (religious, ethnic), and undermines Pakistan’s credibility with Western partners.

Resilience exists but remains inconsistent.

High-quality actors—Soch Fact Check, MMfD, DRF, and select newsrooms—operate competently. However, without stable funding, access to platform data, transparent legal frameworks, and protection against political misuse of “anti-disinformation” tools, their efforts cannot guarantee system-wide resilience.

7.2. Recommendations

Experience Exchange

Encourage closer cooperation with Pakistani public institutions and NGOs to exchange practical experience in countering disinformation and information warfare. In such collaborations, awareness should be raised about the impacts of Russian disinformation—particularly anti-Western narratives, delegitimisation of institutions, legitimisation of military interventions, and the framing of a “multipolar world”. It is advisable to promote monitoring of Sputnik content (including materials republished by The Nation), Russian Embassy accounts, and fact-checking imitation projects such as the GFCN, as well as transparent identification of state-funded foreign media operating in Pakistan.

Communications Diplomacy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

A continuous, multilingual flow of concise corrective messages is recommended, especially when Russian content becomes mainstream or when local political actors cite Russian sources. In the energy sector, a public FAQ or White Paper (on pricing, discounts, logistical constraints, payment mechanisms) would help neutralise narratives portraying Russian energy imports as offering “unconditional benefits.”