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# Information Warfare and Democratic Elections: the Polish experience.

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*The recent Polish election holds profound implications for Poland, Europe, and Russia, with Poland playing a crucial role in supporting Ukraine and welcoming refugees. Simultaneously, the election serves as a case study in the influence of Russian disinformation tactics on democratic processes. Therefore, the aim of this analysis is to provide a comprehensive overview through the example of the Polish elections. For this purpose the first section analyses the differences between former Soviet and current Russian disinformation activities and the nature of the changes. This is followed by a broad overview of the current milestones in Russian-Polish relations and the significance of the area for Russia's foreign and security policy, in order to ensure the completeness of the theoretical understanding. Thus the Polish elections illustrate the multifaceted interaction of Russian disinformation in shaping regional geopolitics and democratic outcomes.*

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### **Information Warfare and Democratic Elections: the Polish experience.**

The recent Polish election has crucial significance not only for Poland but also for Europe, Russia and the continuing war in Ukraine. Poland plays a key role in the Western response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, providing military support to Kiev through the supply of German-manufactured Leopard 2 tanks and Polish MiG-29 fighters. Moreover, the country has demonstrated its humanitarian commitment by welcoming millions of Ukrainian refugees in the wake of the ongoing conflict.

However, the Warsaw Kyiv relationship deteriorated in September, primarily over the export of cheap Ukrainian grain and its impact on Polish farmers and their support both for the ruling party and for Ukraine's resistance struggle. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the Visegrad area, the election of Robert Fico, a critic of Ukraine and an ally of Putin to the Presidency of Slovakia also affected the Central European political balance. In such challenging geopolitical circumstances what role we might wonder does Russian disinformation play?

### **The evolution of Russian Information Warfare.**

For more than two and a half decades, Russia has played a special role in world security policy, just as its predecessor, the Soviet Union did. The distinctive Russian security perspective combines old 'imperial' style governance techniques with the ambition and technical tools of the 21st century. It is the reason, why Russian political thinking continues to divide regional and global public opinion on domestic and foreign policy, military strategy and economic and energy issues. A core feature of Russian statecraft is the extensive network and high impact of its disinformation activities. Russian government agencies and affiliated organizations- have consistently employed a combination of social media and disinformation strategies at all levels of the international community to promote its influence and interests. [Today's Kremlin propaganda notably exploits Western liberal values, of „freedom of speech" and "presenting another point of view".](#) Through such openness, Russia's agencies foment instability in democratic countries in order to render democratic election campaigns increasingly volatile and the resulting governmental outcomes questionable and contested. This is primarily based on the creation of a communication context in the target country, which provides a medium for disruption, fomenting discord among the population, undermining institutional trust, and creating an atmosphere of intimidation and insecurity. By engaging in this activity, Russia not only achieves its local/regional objectives, but also undermines faith in liberal democracy, the rule of law and other Western values. By so doing it also renders Russia's internal and external conduct more viable.

The pattern of interference by the Russian Federation particularly extends across its 'near abroad' and has also extended westward. Over the twenty first century, Russian influence has manifested in the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict ; and in the 2014 and 2022 events in Ukraine. Russian interests also played a role in sabotaging Hillary Clinton's election campaign in 2016, efforts to influence EU parliamentary elections, the Brexit referendum, also 2016 and the 2020 US and Belarus presidential elections In Russian buffer zone states it seeks to affect pivotal domestic political events, such as the recent parliamentary elections in Poland. It is characterized by falsification and disinformation campaigns, aggressive rhetoric against the country, and even military provocations along common border zones. In the recent Polish election the overarching aim was to shape domestic policy by creating a complex context of information, with objectives that involve muddling domestic political

discourse, diminishing support for Ukraine, and amplifying Russia's prominence in the EU and the information sphere.

### **Russia's Disinformation Machine: a New Era or a Return to Soviet Methods?**

Presently, disinformation operations constitute a vital tool in Russia's global influencing and power projection strategy. The question of their origin, whether they derive from Soviet-era practices or represent entirely novel post-Soviet techniques, naturally arises. The response is unequivocal: today's Russian disinformation is a direct descendant of the procedures used by the Soviet Union. Its objectives have endured, its strategies and toolbox are rooted in the past, despite using the opportunities offered by modern technology.

The first general conclusion that can be drawn from a comparison of Soviet and Russian trends is that the nature and frequency of disinformation techniques have evolved.: During the Soviet era, disinformation activities were conducted as part of covert operations, Soviet activity operated in a context of domestic and international public opinion. The US State Department's Active Measures Task Force<sup>1</sup> uncovered 33 Soviet counterfeit operations between 1980-1983. It is true that the numbers increased year by year, but they never reached the level of Russian activity today: [Stopfake.org website alone has uncovered over 500 cases of disinformation in the last 2 years.](#) The paramount importance of disinformation and information technology in Russian hybrid warfare is demonstrated in the 2014 Russian military doctrine. Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, exemplifies this approach, maintaining that information's role in hybrid warfare is to disrupt the functioning of an adversary's vital military, industrial, and administrative institutions while exerting psychological influence through modern information technologies. Furthermore, Vladimir Putin has observed the intensification of media warfare in the modern age, where certain nations seek to monopolize and manipulate information for their own interests. When Putin speaks of a media war, he characterizes it as a battle waged by unspecified nations against Russia, prompting a defensive posture and a call to respond resolutely.

Comparing practices of disinformation in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the differences can be identified in four key areas: digital landscape, social media, cyber attacks, and all technological amplifications of the information space. In the era of digital communication the Kremlin has the internet and social media at its disposal. These platforms grant Russia a global audience and the precision to engage specific demographics with meticulously tailored content. In the realm of social media, Russian disinformation campaigns involve creating fake profiles and manipulating trending topics, leveraging the inherent virality of social platforms to efficiently spread their preferred narratives. Additionally, Russia has developed sophisticated cyber capabilities, allowing Russian agents to infiltrate and release sensitive information, serving the dual purpose of inciting political unrest and shaping public opinion—a recent addition to their strategic toolkit. In a testament to their evolving tactics, Russia adeptly amplifies existing divisions within target nations by exploiting preexisting fault lines, political polarization, and societal issues to sow discord with heightened effectiveness. Example of Russia amplifying existing divisions within a target nation [can be observed in the cases of the Central African Republic](#) and [Venezuela](#). Recent years have witnessed an escalation of Russia's involvement in both country's internal conflicts and political affairs. In the case of the Central African Republic, Russia's dual approach involves providing military support to the government while engaging with rebel factions. This strategy has deepened existing ethnic and sectarian divides, exacerbating the ongoing conflict between government forces and rebel groups. Consequently, Russia's intervention has intensified tensions and rendered the security situation in the country more intricate and precarious.

For Venezuela, Russia has provided significant support to the government of President Nicolás Maduro, including military assistance, economic investments, and political backing. This support has deepened the existing political and social divisions within Venezuela, which have been exacerbated by economic crises and political instability.

Through the adept exploitation of preexisting divisions, Russia has positioned itself as a pivotal player in both the African and South American regions, using its influence to pursue resource interests and expand its presence. These activities vividly illustrate how Russia capitalizes on existing fault lines to advance its strategic objectives.

A recent intelligence report from the US State Department, distributed to over 100 countries on October 20th 2020, (source?) underscores the global repercussions of Moscow's actions. It reveals that coordinated Russian operations between 2020 and 2022 have undermined public trust in at least 11 elections across nine democracies, including the United States, with an additional 17 elections experiencing more subtle manipulations. Russia employs a multifaceted strategy, combining overt and covert tactics, including the orchestration of influence networks and manipulation of proxies overseen by Russian intelligence agencies. For instance, the report discloses clandestine activities by Russia's FSB security service, such as intimidating election officials, orchestrating election-day protests ([Slovakia 2023](#)), and subverting overseas voting procedures during an unspecified European nation's election. Additionally, Russian state media openly discredits the democratic nature of various elections while disseminating groundless claims of electoral fraud in regions across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America leading up to a number of elections in 2020 and 2021, such as the parliamentary or presidential elections in [Syria \(2021\)](#), Venezuela (2020) and [Mongolia \(2020\)](#). Notably, [Russia leverages social media platforms](#) and a network of "proxy websites" to sow doubt about the integrity of electoral processes, [as revealed by the Internet Research Agency](#).

On the other hand, the Russian techniques and tools currently used correlate with Soviet times in two main areas. Firstly, the concept of "active measures" is very much alive in contemporary Russian disinformation efforts. These covert operations seek to exploit divisions and vulnerabilities, whether by aiding extremist factions or leveraging pre-existing political tensions, in order to wield influence over political systems. Taking the Polish elections as an example of these two tactics at work, Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to Poland's western territories as "Stalin's gift to the Poles", which "Warsaw forgot". According to the Russian perspective, an "ungrateful" Poland is seeking to control parts of Ukraine and Belarus. Poland has also been accused of invading Lithuanian territory, claiming historic Russian lands and of playing a role in the historic partition of Czechoslovakia. These statements during the last months, illustrate that Russia's main narrative is one of deepening confrontation, revisionist rhetoric that promotes the revival of historical conflicts and discord within Poland.

Secondly, deception is a common thread woven through Russian communication, manifesting in narratives designed to sow confusion. It involves fabricating news, manipulating documents and altering images to fit Russia's preferred narrative. An illustrative instance could be the dissemination of fake text messages. In the Polish context this took the form of claims that the ruling [Law and Justice party promised pensioners a free funeral in exchange for their votes](#). While the government had previously offered partial funeral cost reimbursement, the promise of full payment was not part of the election campaign. The origin and intent of these messages remain unclear and cannot be definitively linked to Russia, but share a family resemblance to tactics used during the 2014 Ukraine crisis to incite protests and weaken state sovereignty. In those instances, [parents of Ukrainian soldiers were sent false news of their children's deaths](#), triggering widespread protests among mothers across Ukraine against the conscription of young people. Russian political analysts identify this approach as the "shortest route" to the creation of a "protective state" by eroding and weakening state sovereignty in

the pursuit of Russian influence. In an era of heightened international isolation for Russia, this influence can be wielded as a tool to reinforce regional coalitions and formulate a coherent *strategy against a potential collective West*.

In summary besides the well-established Soviet era techniques, notably new dimensions have opened in the scope and range of disinformation. In tandem with the classic written (newspapers) and broadcasted (radio, television) disinformation, Russia's techniques have evolved with a pronounced shift towards leveraging the internet, social media platforms, and mobile devices.

### **Russian-Polish Relations**

Among the numerous European nations entangled in historical conflicts with Russia, Poland holds a distinct and prominent position. It joins the ranks of nations like Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, bearing the brunt of ceaseless Kremlin criticism and enduring the hybrid warfare operations orchestrated by Russian authorities and organizations and social media actors linked to Russia.

One feature of Russian interest reflects the fact that Russian-Polish relations have a rich and turbulent history dating back to late medieval times, characterised by numerous wars. Alongside these historic tensions, both states share a linguistic and ethnic -albeit relatively small in number- minority of Poles in Russia and Russians in Poland due to border disputes and land occupations. After a phase of reconciliation following the demise of communism, relations started a subsequent erosion in the mid-2000s. The primary catalyst for this shift is [the emergence of a more assertive Russian stance in foreign and geopolitical matters](#), beginning in 2008 and extending to the present day. In the aftermath of these developments, contemporary Polish-Russian relations have become marked by the resurgence of deep-seated mistrust. This is further evidenced by a 2022 [survey, which revealed that only 2% of the Polish population holds a positive view of Russia](#), marking the lowest proportion among all surveyed nations. A number of factors explain the negative perception of the Russian Federation. Since 2010 following a tragic plane crash in Smolensk, Polish government ministers have consistently accused the Kremlin of orchestrating the demise of Polish President Lech Kaczynski in that incident. Poland as a vanguard against Russian aggression, plays a prominent role in various cooperative efforts, such as advocating sanctions against Russia, hosting NATO Multinational Battlegroups and also authorizing the establishment of a substantial military presence, -including the [first permanent US garrison](#)- on its soil. Furthermore Poland contributes to NATO's enhanced presence on the eastern flank – in Latvia and Romania. There are components of NATO's military infrastructure on Polish territory, including in Szczecin, Elbląg, Bydgoszcz, and Kraków.

Thirdly a key element in understanding Poland's importance to Russia is the Eurasianist thinking of Russian elites. Alexander Dugin<sup>2</sup>, a major influence on Russia's new imperialist worldview maintains that Russia needs to avoid the trap of being a regional power. Dugin writes that Russia is "*unthinkable without an empire*". This is evidenced by Russian efforts to establish unchallenged influence over its 'near abroad' territories – influencing Polish and previously Belarusian elections, the annexation of Crimea, cyber-attacks against the Baltic States – in order to become a regional policyshaper at the international level. In this context Russia created the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. To give another example, [Kaliningrad a Russian exclave](#) is also situated between Poland and Lithuania, holding a versatile strategic importance. It is a symbol of Russian pride and resilience in the face of historical challenges, and its retention is a matter of national prestige. It's role is two-fold: on the one hand historically it provides a significant foothold in the heart of Europe. On the other hand it has acted as a buffer zone between Russia and NATO, helping to safeguard Russia's western frontiers in military, political, economic and foreign policy terms. As one of Europe's most militarised regions, it is home to a large part of Russia's Baltic fleet, various military installations and equipment, such as [Iskander](#)



[missiles equipped with nuclear warheads](#) capable of reaching European cities for deterrence purposes. In addition, it provides access to the Baltic Sea, to complex energy infrastructure and to economic interconnections. Moreover Russia conducts intelligence operations out of the exclave, gathers information on NATO activities, thus influencing the security dynamics in the region and Europe.

In addition to their contested historical past, ethnic interconnectedness and geographical proximity, Russia also has a political interest in influencing Polish elections. Since 2010 Polish domestic politics have been marked by an increasingly strong anti-Russian attitude. At the same time, the country's relationship with the EU has been fragile over the past eight years due to its populist-nationalist government that has been a major proponent of Euroscepticism. Consequently, Poland has been the subject of numerous EU infringement proceedings for interference in the judiciary and media freedom. Yet, according to Maria Janion, since 1989 Poland has also [presented the West in a favourable image](#). In reality the country is caught between a sentiment of superiority over the 'barbaric East' and subservience to the cultural and technological power of the West. Poland is characterised by a post-colonial mentality, but may at times distance itself from the West to promote itself as a bastion of tradition and traditional Polish values. This kind of distancing from the EU and the undefined identity affiliation affords the opportunity for Russia to exploit political debate through the use of disinformation techniques on the population and creating doubt and anxiety in the electorate,

Taking into consideration this recent history, it's not an overstatement to assert that nowadays Poland is the focus of a historical vilification campaign orchestrated by Kremlin-controlled media. Although Russia cannot be unequivocally associated with the disinformation campaign surrounding the Polish election, there are clear signs of practices consistent with previous Russian precedents. Besides the SMS-case, the statement by Jaroslaw Kaczyński that while Germany has an interest in supporting the Civic Platform (PO) party, Russia has an interest in supporting Poland 2050 (Polska 2050). He also explained that Moscow is looking for some kind of reliable instrument and continues to hope that the current political system, which is not the most comfortable for it, can be either changed or rendered unstable.

In summary, the recent Polish election holds significant implications not only for Poland but also for Europe, Russia, and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Poland's role in providing military support to Ukraine, welcoming Ukrainian refugees, and its complex relationship with Russia all contribute to the intricate geopolitical landscape. Russian disinformation tactics play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and influencing political discourse in various democratic nations, including Poland. While modern technology and platforms like the internet and social media have expanded the scope of disinformation, the core strategies and objectives are rooted in Soviet-era practices. As Poland remains a key player in Central European politics, the historical tensions between Russia and Poland, the resurgence of mistrust, and the impact of disinformation campaigns all add layers of complexity to their relations and to regional geopolitics and its statecraft.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term 'active measures' has a long historical tradition in Russia, reflecting a permanent war mentality that dates back to the Soviet era and even to tsarist Russia. They encompass a wide spectrum of covert political operations, ranging from disinformation campaigns to the staging of uprisings: espionage, propaganda, sabotage and assassinations, all strategically aligned with the foreign policy objectives of the Soviet and Russian governments.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Dugin (1962-) is a leading Russian geopolitical thinker, whose neo- Eurasianist views are fundamentally embedded in the country's geopolitical perspectives and activities. According to Dugin's formulation -based on the conditions of his time- Russia does not have a state history in the strict sense of the term - not including the Soviet Union - its borders are contingent, its cultural markers are confused, its political system is unstable, its economy is fragmented, and its ethnic composition is mixed. The conglomerate is therefore only a product of the disintegration of a global world power and part of the overall picture. What is most important is the determinacy of Russia's geopolitical thinking, which is a product of its specific geographical location and endowments

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