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Russian Information Suppression as FIMI

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Abstract

This working paper examines how Russia seeks to suppress information as part of its foreign information interference and manipulation (FIMI) activities. It analyses the tactics and techniques (TTPs) of information suppression Russia employs domestically, as well as to silence critical voices located outside of Russia. Information suppression is a complicated phenomenon, which is best understood by differentiating between actions aimed at the (1) production, (2) dissemination, and (3) salience of information. In addition, this working paper analyses how Russia's information suppression activities are perceived among different "generations" of Russophone diaspora communities in Latvia and Estonia. Identifying a broad variety of techniques targeting the production, dissemination and salience of information, the paper shows how, in recent years, Russia has intensified its information suppression efforts domestically and transnationally. These techniques have been employed to, first, silence and limit the reach of independent reporting and research, as well as of voices critical of the Putin regime. Within this overarching tactic, controlling information related to Russia's war against Ukraine has become key to government strategy since 2022, resulting in a sharp acceleration of information suppression and other forms of repression, including in Europe. Second, Russia aims to undermine EU/NATO cohesion and foster polarisation across Europe. States with large Russophone communities, such as Estonia and Latvia, are important targets where Russia aims to "manage" information salience to its advantage. Focus group research on the *perception* of information suppression in Latvia and Estonia conducted, by the ARM project, demonstrates how, among Baltic Russian-speakers, only some interpret Russia's suppression of information as an authoritarian practice designed to shape public beliefs and secure loyalty to the regime. Others normalise information suppression in Russia, viewing these measures as efforts to prevent dissent and maintain stability. Russophones who moved to the Baltics after 1991, especially post-February 2022, however, are more critical of Russia than those who lived there before the collapse of the Soviet Union. This stresses the need to differentiate within diaspora communities and illustrates how interventions to protect the information environment from foreign interference can be perceived as illegitimate or repressive.

Introduction

After years of progressively restrictive media and internet policies, Russia has greatly intensified its efforts to control information after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Civic and political rights, including press freedom and freedom of expression, are severely curtailed, while independent media and other critical actors have been forced into exile. In parallel to its extensive domestic repression, Russia has also increased efforts to influence and control information transnationally in, among others, the European Union (EU).

Russia's tactics and techniques of information control have evolved with the rise of emerging technologies, requiring regular and vigilant monitoring.[1] Many current practices combine traditional measures, such as censorship, intimidation and prosecution, with digital measures including disinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and the use of AI, and they often extend beyond Russia's borders to target diasporas and external audiences. By exerting control over how information is generated and circulated, these techniques seek to shape how individuals and societies understand their environment and their place within it. Such control is central to efforts to destabilise or polarise political communities and institutions, as influence over information production underpins the ability to manipulate perceptions, erode trust, and maintain and exert power.

In response to Russia's intensified foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) activities, the EU restricted the distribution of a wide array of Russian state-affiliated media in 2022 – covering broadcast, satellite and distribution via online platforms – in relation to their role in disseminating disinformation and propaganda about Russia's war against Ukraine. The loss of these mass means of information influence, such as the popular Russian transnational broadcaster RT, which previously reached European audiences in English, German, French and Spanish, was compensated through a combination of other online techniques. According to a report prepared for the European Commission:

> *During the first year of Russia's illegal war in Ukraine, social media companies enabled the Kremlin to run a large-scale disinformation campaign targeting the European Union and its allies, reaching an aggregate audience of at least 165 million and generating at least 16 billion views. Preliminary analysis suggests that the reach and influence of Kremlin-backed accounts*

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[1] Feldstein, S. (2021). *The rise of digital repression: How technology is reshaping power, politics, and resistance*. Oxford University Press.

has grown further in the first half of 2023, driven in particular by the dismantling of Twitter's safety standards.[2]

The report highlights how the activity of the social media accounts of Russian government officials and institutions, including embassies, peaked after the Russian state-associated media were blocked as they took over their role in disinformation activities. This illustrates Russia's ability to adapt to the imposed restrictions by exploiting the characteristics of our online information environment. The so-called Doppelgänger information operation, which disseminates disinformation through false websites simulating established Western media and using social media advertisements to push these false websites to potential audiences, similarly instrumentalises how citizens engage with information online.

Studies of authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders have focused on mis- and disinformation and often approach these strategies within the framework of hybrid warfare. Transnational information manipulation is an approach to the exercise of power that remains under the threshold of traditional military activities that would be considered escalatory or invoke war. A classic definition of power is "the ability to affect outcomes […] including the ability to *influence* the preferences of others as well as to *coerce* them by altering their incentives or constraints."[3] Russia uses a mix of *coercive* and *influence* tools of power, operationalised through various tactics and techniques that do not justify a military response, but that go well beyond "only" propaganda.

The types and prevalence of Russian FIMI activities are well-documented, with foreign disinformation receiving extensive scrutiny. Other forms of foreign information manipulation and interference, however, remain overlooked, including efforts to *suppress* information transnationally: aiming to silence voices or narratives to strengthen the regime's position. Within studies of transnational repression, in turn, the role of information dissemination infrastructures as targets and means of repressive actions, and the role of, e.g., platform companies in facilitating or resisting such efforts, remains underexplored.

Following the ARM policy brief, we define information suppression as "a set of actions to silence information with the purpose of muting dissenting voices or narratives within and outside a country's borders, serving the interest of strengthening a regime's grip on power." In addition, information suppression:

- is intentional, serving the interest of preserving power. However, this does not mean that information suppression is always coordinated or coerced from above.

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[2] European Commission (2023). *Digital Services Act – Application of the risk management framework to Russian disinformation campaigns*. Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/764631.

[3] Baldwin, D. A. (1979). *Power analysis and world politics: New trends versus old tendencies. World Politics*, *31*(2), 161-194.

- is transnational, highlighting the link between domestic and global tactics of information suppression, with diaspora groups as both agents and targets.[4]

To study information suppression as a form of FIMI, the ARM project differentiates between information suppression efforts that target the production, the dissemination, and the salience of information. The first type targets individuals or professionals, in particular within the media and academic sphere, or human rights defenders, to prevent the production of undesirable information. For example, this may entail defamation laws, extra-legal intimidation, harassment and threats, or by obstructing the collection of primary information. Second, activities that suppress information dissemination aim to make certain types of sources or types of information difficult to access. For example, this can be done through internet restrictions, regulating or restricting digital technology companies or manipulating online information intermediaries, such as social media and search engines, to limit the online visibility of news. Finally, if information is nonetheless produced and disseminated, states can seek to suppress information salience, i.e. "targeting the visibility or impact of certain information through burying information, or through the promotion of social norms on what should be talked about and not."[5]

This working paper analyses Russia's efforts to suppress information transnationally in Europe. In addition to examining Russian efforts that target information production, dissemination and salience, it provides insight into how these activities are perceived by key diaspora communities. In its analysis, the working paper gives special attention to the Baltic states of Latvia and Estonia. Both countries have a common border with Russia, and their histories are deeply entwined with periods of Russian domination – first as territories of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century, and subsequently under Soviet occupation from 1940 until 1991. Both countries are also home to substantial Russophone minorities: in Latvia, approximately 40% of the 1.9 million population, and in Estonia, nearly 30% of the 1.4 million inhabitants, count Russian as their mother tongue. Most of these Russian-speakers are Soviet-era settlers or their descendants. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Latvia and Estonia initially engaged with Russia in a pragmatic manner. However, as Vladimir Putin consolidated power in the 2000s and Russia pursued a more assertive foreign policy, claiming a responsibility to "protect" Russophone populations abroad, both countries became increasingly wary. In Latvia and Estonia, Russia is now perceived as the foremost threat to national security, a sentiment that has grown markedly stronger following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Baltic states occupy a position of particular significance in Russian foreign policy due to their historical, geopolitical, and symbolic roles in the post-Soviet space. Having been

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[4] ARM (2024). Information Suppression. *ARM Policy Brief*. 1/24.
[5] ARM (2024). Information Suppression. *ARM Policy Brief*. 1/24.

incorporated into the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, Estonia and Latvia represent territories whose loss marked the decline of Moscow's great-power status in Russian strategic discourse. Their subsequent integration into both the EU and NATO placed Western political and military structures directly along Russia's borders, intensifying Russian perceptions of strategic vulnerability and encirclement. As a result, the Baltic region has come to function as a focal point in broader tensions between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic security order. Equally important is the presence of substantial Russophone populations in Latvia and Estonia, which has acquired political and ideological relevance in Russian policy narratives. Russian authorities frequently invoke the protection of "compatriots abroad" as a justification for political engagement and diplomatic pressure, framing language and citizenship policies in the Baltic states as evidence of discrimination against Russian-speaking minorities. Within the framework of the "Russian World" (*Russkiy Mir*) concept, these communities are portrayed as belonging to a broader cultural and civilizational space extending beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Consequently, Russophone minorities serve not only as an object of Russia's identity-based discourse but also as an instrument within Russia's broader strategy of influence, particularly in the domains of information policy and regional security.

In response, Latvia and Estonia have further tightened their policies towards Russophone populations, a process frequently characterised by scholars as the "securitisation" of these groups. Within local political discourse, the geopolitical attitudes and media preferences of Russophone populations – where the former is often considered a direct consequence of the latter – have long been viewed as posing a threat not only to social cohesion, but also to national security. Within this discourse, the widespread use of Russian media among Russophone communities is frequently cited as the primary reason for their pro-Kremlin geopolitical attitudes. However, such view overlooks the actual diversity of geopolitical orientations that exist within this group.

As is common in research on foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), we differentiate between tactics and procedures (TTPs).[6] The European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) defines *tactics* as an adversary's high-level goals or aims and *techniques* as the standard methods used to achieve these goals.[7] The paper is based on a review of academic literature, legislation and policy, policy reports, reports produced by human rights organisations, and journalistic reporting; a discursive analysis of strategies employed by

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[6] While the conventional cyber security approach to the exploration of information manipulation and interference include identifying Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs), we are not including Procedures in our analyses. This is in line with common practice in the information defence community using the DISARM frameworks, which avoids describing procedures - as these could easily be picked up by adversaries as explicit guidebooks for conducting such operations.

[7] European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA). (2025, October 1). *ENISA Threat Landscape 2025*. European Union Agency for Cybersecurity. https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/enisa-threat-landscape-2025.

(pro-)Russian media publications, vlogs and official documents in Estonia; and, online focus groups conducted with participants from the Russian-speaking populations in Latvia and Estonia. It first discusses Russian tactics and techniques of information suppression aimed at information production, followed by those targeting information dissemination and information salience. The last section addresses the perception of information suppression activities drawing upon the results of the focus group research.

The working paper shows how Russia has increased its information suppression efforts domestically *and* transnationally, employing a broad variety of techniques. Information production is targeted to erode independent journalism and research and undermine EU/NATO cohesion by creating an environment of fear and self-censorship. This weakens Europe's ability to counter Russian propaganda and sustain unified support for Ukraine. The overall impact of techniques targeting information production, such as smear campaigns, strategic lawsuits and media capture, includes a chilling effect on media diversity, reduced investigative output on Russian threats, and heightened vulnerability to information manipulation, as producers face relocation, financial ruin, or legal battles. Russia also targets information dissemination infrastructures intensively to silence dissent, with transnational implications. By blocking nearly all foreign social media platforms and messaging applications, the options available to independent media working from exile to reach audiences in Russia have become slim.

The case study of Estonia underlines the importance of studying the manipulation of information salience as part of transnational information suppression, and the wide variety of information manipulation strategies that Russia employs (e.g., by labelling certain speaking positions as extremist or fascist). Some strategies, such as de-politicising the debate, ostensibly "purifying" it of political content, are not commonly included in disinformation research and warrant further attention. The focus group research, finally, demonstrates how, among Baltic Russian-speakers, only some interpret Russia's suppression of information as an authoritarian practice designed to shape public beliefs and secure loyalty to the regime. Others normalise information suppression in Russia, viewing these measures as efforts to prevent dissent and maintain stability, contending that the suppression of information is a universal practice serving political elites. Russophones who moved to the Baltics after 1991, especially post-February 2022, are generally more critical of Russia than those who lived there before the collapse of the Soviet Union. This stresses the need to differentiate within diaspora communities and illustrates how interventions to protect the information environment from foreign interference can be perceived as illegitimate or repressive.

1. Suppressing information production

This section examines the tactics and techniques Russia employs to control narratives and silence dissent by targeting the production of information, focusing on suppression of

information production outside of Russia. These tactics and techniques are a part of Russia's hybrid threat activity repertoire that directly targets the people and organisations that produce independent information, among them journalists, editors, researchers, NGOs and their campaigns.

Russia employs a range of hybrid tactics to suppress information production in Europe by directly pressuring journalists, media outlets, and content creators who produce critical reporting on Russian actions, particularly the Ukraine war.[8] These techniques blend legal, physical, cyber, and economic coercion to silence voices, often through state-affiliated actors such as the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU, *Glavnoye razvedyvatelnoye upravleniye*) and Federal Security Service (FSB), proxies, or disinformation networks.[9] The primary aim is to erode independent journalism, amplify pro-Russian narratives, and undermine EU/NATO cohesion by creating an environment of fear and self-censorship. This weakens Europe's ability to counter Russian propaganda and sustain unified support for Ukraine. The overall impact includes a chilling effect on media diversity, reduced investigative output on Russian threats, and heightened vulnerability to information manipulation, as producers face relocation, financial ruin, or legal battles.

This section outlines the tactics and techniques identified in the existing literature. The overview is based on desk research and synthesises techniques that have been broadly identified across prior studies. It provides a conceptual framework that serves as a starting point for categorising empirical evidence and for refining and expanding the typology as additional evidence is gathered.

The focus on suppression aimed at information production captures a set of tactics and techniques that operate across borders to shape, constrain, or distort the conditions under which information is produced, accessed, and disseminated internationally. These practices are particularly relevant for understanding contemporary influence and coercion strategies, as they target journalists, researchers, media organisations, and knowledge institutions beyond the territorial control of the originating state. While the analytical emphasis is on transnational activity, these tactics are closely linked to domestic suppression practices, which provide the testing ground, institutional infrastructure, and normative logic for their external projection. Domestic controls over media, academia, and civil society establish the repertoire of methods,

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[8] Susi, M., Benedek, W., Fischer-Lessiak, G., Kettemann, M., Schippers, B., & Viljanen, J. (2022). *Governing information flows during war: A comparative study of content governance and media policy responses after Russia's attack on Ukraine*. Verlag Hans-Bredow-Institut.; Yuskiv, B., Karpchuk, N., & Khomych, S. (2021). Media reports as a tool of hybrid and information warfare (the case of RT–Russia Today). *Codrul Cosminolui*, *1*(27), 235-258.

[9] Gochua, A., Zedelashvili, T., & Giorgadze, G. (2022). Geopolitics of the Russia-Ukraine War and Russian Cyber Attacks on Ukraine-Georgia and Expected Threats. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, 10.

such as legal pressure, intimidation, access denial, and narrative enforcement, that are subsequently adapted for use in transnational contexts.

1.1 Tactics and techniques

1.1.1 Targeting the personal

Russia employs techniques that target the personal sphere and operate through a continuum of pressure that blends psychological, reputational, and physical coercion.[10] These include sustained harassment and smear campaigns, intimidation that can escalate to violence or assassination, and espionage. Personal vulnerabilities are deliberately exploited through the amplification of weaknesses, the construction of false or misleading narratives, and the selective exposure of private data.[11] Coordinated online harassment, such as trolling, threats, doxxing, stalking, and organised smear narratives, works to exhaust and discredit targets, while troll farms and aligned media outlets amplify conspiracy theories and defamatory claims about journalists, researchers, and activists.

These digital tactics are reinforced offline through surveillance, stalking, and intimidation by pro-Kremlin activists or networks. Smear campaigns routinely portray targets as "NATO agents," "Russophobes," or extremists, eroding their professional credibility and social standing.[12] In parallel, intelligence operations extend into European states, monitoring, threatening, and in some cases preparing for physical attacks against exiled Russian and Eastern European journalists and activists.[13] The recruitment of "freelance" saboteurs online to conduct arson, vandalism, or similar acts further deepens the climate of fear and insecurity, signalling that dissent carries personal and potentially lethal consequences.

These techniques are designed to undermine the credibility of information producers by shifting attention from the substance of their work to their personal character and alleged biases. By discrediting journalists and researchers, they create fear and a chilling effect that deters critical

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[10] Hedling, E., and Ördén, H. (2025). Disinformation, deterrence and the politics of attribution. *International Affairs*, 101(3), 967-986.

[11] Gabdulhakov, R. (2021). Media Control and Citizen-Critical Publics in Russia: Are Some 'Pigs' More Equal Than Others?. *Media and Communication*, 9(4), 62-72.

[12] Darczewska, J., & Żochowski, P. (2015). *Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy. A Weapon of Mass Destruction*. Point of View, No.26. Center for Eastern Studies, Poland; Hellman, M. (2024). *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden* (p. 293). Springer Nature.

[13] Costa-Kostritsky, V. (2016). We are journalists, not terrorists: How reporters around Europe are being silenced by accusations that their work threatens national security. *Index on Censorship*, *45*(2), 11-14.; Cordell, R., & Medhi, K. (2024). Transnational Repression: International Cooperation in Silencing Dissent. *International Studies Quarterly*, 68(3), sqae108.

reporting. Targets are made socially and professionally "toxic," prompting editors, universities, think tanks, and funders to distance themselves to avoid risk or controversy.

Personal threats—often directed at high-profile figures—serve a signalling function, warning the wider media and research ecosystem of the potential consequences of dissent. Substantive debate over findings is replaced by meta-debates about loyalty, motives, or integrity, while reputations are further eroded through coordinated false narratives, impersonation, and the use of labels such as "foreign agent." Collectively, these practices convey that critics are never fully safe, even in exile, and that geographical distance offers little protection. The result is to discourage cooperation with investigative journalists and human-rights organisations, particularly those based in Europe, and to narrow the space for independent scrutiny.

The Jessikka Aro case*

The sustained smear campaign against Finnish investigative journalist Jessikka Aro is a well-documented example of information suppression directed at the *producers* of information. It illustrates how personalised harassment, narrative recycling, and reputational attacks function as a deliberate strategy to suppress critical reporting without resorting to formal censorship. Aro became a target after publishing investigative work on Russian "troll factories" in St. Petersburg and the role of coordinated pro-Kremlin social media operations in shaping information environments outside Russia. Rather than responding to her reporting through rebuttal or counter-evidence, pro-Kremlin networks shifted the focus to *Aro herself*, launching an intense and prolonged campaign of harassment and defamation. This campaign unfolded across multiple platforms and formats, blending online abuse with elements of offline intimidation.

Central to the smear campaign was the recycling and weaponisation of personal history. Troll networks and aligned activists dug up a decades-old minor drug-related conviction from Aro's youth, when she was 20 years old. This information, which had no relevance to her professional work or investigative findings, was reframed and amplified into a false and highly stigmatising narrative portraying her as a "drug addict," a "criminal," and eventually a "NATO drug dealer." These labels were deliberately chosen to undermine her credibility as a journalist and to align her with conspiratorial narratives about Western intelligence services. The campaign also included symbolic psychological intimidation**,** most notably a fake SMS message sent to Aro purporting to come from her deceased father. Aro was subjected to continuous online abuse, threats, coordinated trolling, and public accusations that she was working for Western intelligence agencies. Taken together, these actions sought to portray her as a hostile actor embedded in a broader geopolitical conspiracy.

The smear campaign functioned as a mechanism of information suppression. By shifting attention away from the substance of Aro's investigations and onto her personal character, the campaign aimed to delegitimise her reporting pre-emptively. Editors, audiences, and potential sources were encouraged to doubt her credibility, while other journalists were shown the personal cost of investigating Russian information operations. The techniques used – doxxing, narrative amplification, conspiracy framing, emotional manipulation, and relentless repetition – align closely with broader patterns observed in Russian information operations against critics, both domestic and foreign. The goal was not only to silence Aro, but to raise the personal, professional, and psychological cost of her work to a level that would deter both her and others from pursuing similar investigations.

Finnish courts ultimately convicted several pro-Kremlin activists involved in the harassment of Aro on charges including aggravated defamation and stalking**.** These convictions formally recognised that what had occurred was not legitimate public criticism or free expression, but sustained and unlawful intimidation. Nevertheless, the legal victory came only after years of pressure, during which Aro's ability to work freely and safely was significantly constrained.

Impact: These pressures reduce public trust in journalists and experts and may drive them to withdraw from public debate. Self-censorship increases, journalists abandon sensitive beats, and time and resources are diverted from reporting to personal security and legal defence. In more severe cases, journalists are forced into hiding or exile, disrupting newsrooms and reducing on-the-ground coverage, while a wider culture of fear amplifies self-censorship among peers. Media organisations and NGOs absorb significant costs as security becomes a core operational concern, which further limits resources for content production. Reputational attacks damage trust in affected outlets, reducing audience engagement and funding, and fostering internal polarisation and reluctance to work with or hire "tainted" information producers. Younger journalists and freelancers observe these risks and may avoid the Russia beat altogether, shrinking Europe's pool of expertise.

The cumulative effect is a narrowing of the information environment. Editors may judge certain investigations as "not worth the trouble," which is precisely the intended outcome. Some experts reduce their public visibility or leave media platforms entirely, diminishing authoritative commentary, while serious investigative work is increasingly buried under personalised disinformation. At the same time, sources and whistleblowers become more hesitant to come forward, perceiving a heightened risk even within the EU or the UK.

1.1.2 SLAPP/lawfare

One increasingly common way to suppress critical journalism is through the use of expensive defamation and data-protection lawsuits**,** often referred to as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**.**[14] These lawsuits are typically filed not because the plaintiff expects to win on the merits, but because the legal process itself imposes heavy financial and psychological costs on journalists, authors, and publishers. In the European context, such cases have frequently been brought in plaintiff-friendly jurisdictions, historically including the United Kingdom, where defamation laws have made it relatively easy for wealthy individuals to sue. The plaintiffs are often Russian oligarchs or state-linked companies, which allows the Russian state to maintain plausible deniability while still benefiting from the silencing or discouragement of investigative reporting that threatens its interests.[15]

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[14] Pech, L. (2022). The Rule of Law as a Weapon? Authoritarian Lawfare and Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *33*(4), 128-142; Vandekerckhove, M. (2021). SLAPPs in the EU Context: Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation as a Threat to Democracy. *European Human Rights Law Review*, *26*(2), 123-139.; Baldwin, C. (2017). Libel Tourism and the Global Threat to Free Speech. *Journal of Media Law*, *9*(1), 1-24.

[15] Kanellis, G. (2025, August 10). The Rule of Law Under Siege: SLAPPs and the Chilling of Democratic Participation in Europe. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5386254.

Catherine Belton's *Putin's People**

A widely cited example of the use of legal methods to suppress investigative reporting is the series of lawsuits brought in London against journalist Catherine Belton and her publisher following the publication of her 2020 book 'Putin's People'. The book examined how former KGB networks consolidated power in post-Soviet Russia and extended political and economic influence into Western states, including the United Kingdom.

Shortly after publication, Belton and her publisher HarperCollins were hit with a wave of defamation lawsuits filed in the UK by four Russian oligarchs, among them Roman Abramovich, as well as by the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft. Each claimant challenged different passages of the book, resulting in multiple overlapping legal actions proceeding simultaneously in a jurisdiction known for high legal costs and historically plaintiff-friendly defamation laws.

The lawsuits targeted dozens of statements across the book, forcing the author and publisher to defend the work line-by-line. Legal scholars and press-freedom organisations described this pattern as characteristic of *Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs):* cases in which the *process* of litigation is itself the punishment. Even when claims are weak or ultimately unsuccessful, the sheer cost, duration, and uncertainty of legal proceedings can exhaust defendants and deter others from similar investigations.

Free-speech groups, investigative journalism organisations, and members of the UK Parliament publicly criticised the lawsuits as an attempt to intimidate and silence critical reporting on Russian elites rather than a genuine effort to correct factual inaccuracies. The plaintiffs were not state officials acting openly on behalf of the Kremlin, but wealthy individuals and a state-linked company. This structure provided plausible deniability while still aligning closely with Russian state interests in discouraging scrutiny of power networks, corruption, and influence abroad.

HarperCollins was forced to devote substantial resources to legal defence, including extensive pre-trial review and negotiations. Several cases were eventually settled after costly proceedings, involving clarifications or minor amendments, but no judicial finding that the book's core arguments were false. The case sent a signal to the publishing and media industries: the *Putin's People* lawsuits illustrate how legal systems in democratic states can be used as instruments of information suppression. Powerful actors can narrow the space for investigative reporting by transforming courts into arenas of intimidation.

*Coe, P., Moosavian, R., & Wragg, P. (2025). Addressing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs): a critical interrogation of legislative, and judicial responses. Journal of Media Law, 1-40.

The aim of these lawsuits is not only to challenge specific claims, but to deter investigations into Russian power, corruption, and political influence more broadly. By dragging journalists and publishers into long, complex legal battles, these cases drain time, money, and credibility. They also send a clear warning to others: if you publish in-depth investigations

into Russian money or influence networks, you may face years of litigation, regardless of whether your reporting is accurate. This practice is often described as **"libel tourism,"** reflecting the strategic choice of courts most favourable to plaintiffs.

Impact: The impact on information production is substantial. Defending against even weak lawsuits can cost hundreds of thousands of euros, far beyond the means of most journalists and small media outlets. Publishers respond by investing heavily in legal vetting of any work that touches on Russian elites or state-linked actors. Smaller outlets, freelancers, and investigative collectives often avoid such topics altogether. Even when journalists ultimately win their cases, the process can take years, exhaust budgets, and discourage future investigative projects. Over time, this normalises the use of lawsuits as a tool of intimidation rather than justice.[16] Resources that would otherwise go toward research, reporting, and public debate are redirected toward legal defence. The result is a quieter, narrower media environment in which some of the most important questions about foreign influence, corruption, and accountability are left unexplored. Scholars and press-freedom organisations increasingly view this form of lawfare as a key component of contemporary information warfare and hybrid influence strategies.

1.1.3 Cyber operations

Cyber operations are increasingly used to suppress independent journalism and civil-society work by attacking the technical systems that make information production possible. These operations include hacking into email accounts or content-management systems, launching distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks to take news sites offline, destroying or manipulating data, and conducting so-called "hack-and-leak" operations, in which stolen material is selectively released to embarrass or discredit the target.[17]

The aim of these attacks is not only espionage: by disrupting digital infrastructure, attackers can halt news production at critical moments, such as during elections, political crises, or major investigations. When internal emails or documents are stolen, they can be leaked selectively, taken out of context, or mixed with fabricated material to damage reputations and undermine trust. Importantly, attribution is often ambiguous, allowing attackers to deny responsibility while still achieving their objectives.

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[16] Coe, P., Moosavian, R., & Wragg, P. (2025). Addressing strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs): a critical interrogation of legislative, and judicial responses. *Journal of Media Law*, *17*(1), 103-142.
[17] Rid, T. (2020). *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.; Deibert, R.J. (2019). The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media. *Journal of Democracy*, *30*(1), 25-39.

Cyberattack on TV5Monde*

In April 2015, the French international television network TV5Monde was hit by one of the most serious cyberattacks ever carried out against a European media organisation. The attack took the broadcaster off air, disrupting television transmissions across multiple countries and shutting down its websites and social media accounts. TV5Monde was unable to broadcast news or communicate with its audiences, illustrating how cyber operations can instantly silence a major information producer without firing a shot.

The perpetrators claimed responsibility under the name "Cyber Caliphate," presenting themselves as supporters of the so-called Islamic State. This claim was reinforced by jihadist imagery and messages posted on TV5Monde's defaced websites and social media accounts. Subsequent investigations by French authorities concluded that this attribution was deliberately misleading. Instead, the attack was later attributed to APT28, a well-known Russian military intelligence–linked hacking group also referred to as Fancy Bear.

The attackers gained access to systems that controlled broadcasting operations, websites, and email accounts. They disabled transmission equipment, erased or corrupted data, and published stolen internal documents online. According to post-incident assessments, TV5Monde faced not only immediate outages but also long-term damage, as engineers had to rebuild parts of the network almost from scratch to ensure it was secure and operational again. The incident reportedly cost the broadcaster millions of euros and required months of recovery.

By taking a major broadcaster off air, the attackers demonstrated that media infrastructure itself could be a target in geopolitical conflict. The use of a false Islamist identity added a layer of plausible deniability and confusion, initially steering attention away from state actors and exploiting existing fears related to terrorism. Scholars have since described this as a classic example of *hybrid cyber operations*, combining technical sabotage with deception and narrative manipulation.

The attack forced not only TV5Monde but also other European media organisations to reconsider their cyber vulnerabilities. Significant resources had to be redirected toward cyber-security, staff training, and crisis planning – resources that would otherwise have supported journalism and programming. The case is often seen as an early warning of how state-linked cyber capabilities could be used to suppress or manipulate information environments during periods of tension or crisis. Rather than censoring content directly, the attack targeted the infrastructure that makes journalism possible.

*Weedon, J., et al. (2018). Russian Strategic Cyber Operations and Information Warfare. In *Beyond 'Cyber War': Perspectives on Cyber Conflict*, NATO CCDCOE; Heickerö, R. (2019). Emerging Cyber Threats and Russian Views on Information Warfare and Information Operations. In K. Geers (Ed.), *Cyber Warfare in Perspective: A Practitioner's View* (pp. 237-252). NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE).

Funded by the European Union.

Impact: For journalists, media organisations, NGOs, and those carrying out political campaigns, the impact is immediate and long-lasting. Cyberattacks can cause sudden outages of websites and broadcasting systems, loss of data, or prolonged downtime while systems are restored. Organisations must divert time, money, and staff away from reporting or advocacy and toward cyber-security, legal review, and crisis communication. For smaller outlets with limited resources, repeated attacks can be financially crippling and may ultimately force closure.

Beyond the technical damage, cyber operations also undermine trust in information itself. When internal communications are leaked, audiences may struggle to distinguish authentic material from manipulated or forged content. Even accurate reporting can be dismissed with claims that it is "just a hack" or part of a disinformation operation. Over time, this creates a chilling effect: journalists become more reluctant to store sensitive investigations digitally or to communicate with sources through normal channels, making investigative work slower, riskier, and more expensive. Scholars increasingly describe these practices as part of hybrid or information warfare**,** where cyber tools are used not only to steal information, but to shape what information can be produced, published, and trusted.**[18]** In this sense, techniques such as hacking and DDoS attacks function as indirect censorship: they do not ban speech outright, but they raise the cost and risk of producing it to a level that discourages sustained investigative work.

1.1.4 Economic control of media

The technique of economic control of media includes media capture and financial coercion and relies on economic control rather than direct censorship. Kremlin-friendly oligarchs or business networks acquire stakes in television channels, newspapers, and online outlets, often through opaque ownership structures**.** Cash-strapped media are further drawn in through cheap syndicated content, preferential advertising, or favourable funding arrangements**,** which create long-term financial dependence.[19] Regulatory loopholes and sympathetic regulators are then used to protect or privilege these outlets. On digital platforms,

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[18] Tounsi, W., & Rais, H. (2018). A survey on technical threat intelligence in the age of sophisticated cyber attacks. *Computers & security*, *72*, 212-233.

[19] Štětka, V., & Hájek, R. (2021). *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Application of the Media Pluralism Monitor 2021 in the European Union*. European University Institute; Yalamov, T. (2018). Russian Influence, Trust in Media and Media Capture. In O. Shentov, R. Stefanov, & M. Vladimirov, *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 43-65). Routledge; Global Analytics (2021). *Countering the Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe*. https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Countering-Kremlins-Media-Influence-in-Europe.pdf.

critical voices may also be suppressed indirectly through demonetisation or algorithmic demotion.

Media capture in Southeast Europe

A major study by the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) describes media capture in Southeast Europe as a gradual process that exploits local vulnerabilities, such as weak transparency of media ownership, politicised regulatory bodies, highly concentrated advertising markets, and heavy reliance on external capital.* Together, these conditions make it easier to tilt national and regional information environments toward Kremlin-friendly narratives while pushing investigative and critical journalism to the margins.

One common route for this influence is indirect control through local business networks. Rather than Russian state actors purchasing media outlets outright, which could provoke political resistance or public scrutiny, influence is often exercised through domestic oligarchs, shell companies, or politically connected investors. These actors may have economic or political incentives to align with Moscow-friendly positions. Ownership links do not need to be openly Russian to shape editorial outcomes, particularly where regulatory oversight is weak and beneficial ownership rules are poorly enforced.

A second route operates through economic leverage, especially in smaller and financially fragile media markets. Outlets struggling to survive can become dependent on preferential advertising from state-linked or politically steered sources, on cheap syndicated content that lowers production costs but narrows editorial choice, or on informal distribution advantages tied to political connections. According to CSD's analysis, these structural pressures steadily marginalise independent producers and erode media pluralism over time, even in the absence of formal censorship or outright bans.

Serbia is often highlighted as a key case because it lies outside EU media regulation, yet functions as a regional media hub. One prominent example is RT Balkan, which Reporters Without Borders describes as adapting Kremlin narratives to local audiences and helping disseminate them across the region despite EU-level restrictions on RT within member states.** This model does not require capturing every outlet individually; a single well-resourced platform can saturate the media ecosystem with ready-made narratives that local outlets can quote, reproduce, or reference.

The cumulative effect of these mechanisms is rarely a sudden shutdown of media organisations. Instead, it is a slow reshaping of incentives within newsrooms. Editors learn which topics invite financial or political pressure, coverage shifts toward safer and less confrontational commentary, and costly investigative journalism is gradually sidelined. Over time, critical journalists leave captured outlets – or leave the profession altogether – further hollowing out independent reporting capacity. This pattern mirrors broader findings on media capture across the Western Balkans, where such processes undermine pluralism, weaken democratic accountability, and place sustained economic pressure on independent media.

* Shentov, O., Stefanov, R., & Galev, T. (2021). *Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe: Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation*. Center for the Study of Democracy. https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2021_03/KP5_ENG_WEB.pdf.
**Reporters without borders (2024, October 7). From Russia to Serbia: How RT spreads the Kremlin's propaganda in the Balkans despite EU sanctions. https://rsf.org/en/russia-serbia-how-rt-spreads-kremlin-s-propaganda-balkans-despite-eu-sanctions.

The technique is used to gradually reshape media markets, particularly in parts of Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans, so that independent and investigative journalism becomes economically unviable. By favouring compliant outlets and quietly cutting off revenue streams for critical ones, this approach encourages editorial lines that are "pragmatic" or sympathetic to Kremlin positions while sidelining scrutiny of Russian power, corruption, and influence.

Impact: The impact of media capture is structural and long-term. Independent outlets face shrinking budgets, layoffs, mergers with state-friendly entities, or closure. Journalists working inside captured media have strong incentives to self-censor, while more critical staff often leave, further hollowing out independent capacity. Outlets that refuse Kremlin-linked funding survive, if at all, as small, niche, or digital-only platforms. Over time, this produces a biased information environment: abundant "neutral" or Russia-friendly content, and far less sustained investigative reporting.

1.1.5 Diplomatic and access restrictions

Visa and credential controls are an effective way to suppress information production as they target the conditions of newsgathering rather than the content of reporting.[20] When a state can decide who receives a journalist visa, whether a correspondent's accreditation is renewed, and which outlets are allowed into official press spaces, it can shape the reporting environment by filtering access to primary sources and on-the-ground observation. Legal scholarship on accreditation highlights this "privilege paradox": systems designed to manage access can also become tools of control when gatekeepers – often state bodies – selectively grant or deny the status and access that make journalism possible.[21]

This technique works through visa denials, non-renewals, and accreditation refusals directed at correspondents or outlets labelled as "unfriendly," alongside selective access that favours more accommodating media. Over time, access becomes a reward structure: outlets that are perceived as "softer" retain channels to officials and press events, while more critical producers lose routine access, face bureaucratic delays, or are pushed out entirely. Accreditation regimes are especially vulnerable to politicisation: once access and professional status depend on

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[20] Transcontinental times (2021). Expulsion of Senior BBC Journalist From Russia – Direct Assault on Media Freedom. https://www.transcontinentaltimes.com/expulsion-of-senior-bbc-journalist-from-russia-direct-assault-on-media-freedom/; Lim, L. (2025). Foreign Correspondence in China: Authoritarian Media Control and Journalistic Responses. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612251379585

[21] Reuters (2024, March 21). Russia declines to renew visa of Spanish reporter for El Mundo. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-declines-renew-visa-spanish-reporter-el-mundo-2024-03-21/.

discretionary approval, the gatekeeper can narrow the set of actors able to report as journalists in the first place.[22]

Foreign correspondents*

Russia can suppress critical reporting without banning specific stories by controlling the practical conditions under which foreign journalists can work. One of the clearest mechanisms is the systematic refusal (or non-renewal) of visas and press accreditation for correspondents from "unfriendly" countries, combined with selective access to major events and officials. Because foreign reporters generally need both a journalist visa and accreditation to work legally in Russia, the denial or withdrawal of either can function as a de facto expulsion—removing a newsroom's in-country capacity overnight and sharply reducing its ability to gather first-hand evidence.

This practice is consistent with what scholarship on foreign correspondence shows more broadly: when states control accreditation and access, correspondents' "agency" is constrained not only by overt repression but by bureaucratic gatekeeping and the threat of removal. Research on foreign correspondents covering Russia (and the U.S.-Russia relationship) highlights how accreditation regimes and political tensions shape what journalists can do on the ground, including how they build sources, verify claims, and maintain a sustained reporting presence. More generally, research on journalist expulsion demonstrates that removal disrupts news production by breaking routines and access networks, forcing organisations to adapt rapidly under uncertainty, often leading to more remote coverage and fewer independent investigations inside the country.*

In practice, Russia has made this gatekeeping visible by explicitly tying access decisions to geopolitics. For example, the Kremlin has stated that media from "unfriendly" countries would not be accredited for major events such as the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum – an approach that limits direct questioning, face-to-face access to officials, and the ability to report atmospherics and off-script interactions. In other cases, Russia has declined to renew visas or accreditation for individual foreign correspondents, effectively forcing them to leave and leaving outlets without a bureau presence.

The impact on European information production is predictable and significant. When correspondents are pushed out or denied entry, outlets must rely more on remote reporting, exiled sources, and open-source material. These tools can be powerful, but they also narrow what can be independently confirmed on the ground and can reduce the depth of local context that sustained in-country reporting provides. Scholarship on foreign correspondents' constrained agency helps explain why: once routine access and physical presence are disrupted, journalists lose both the informal source networks and the everyday verification opportunities that underpin robust primary reporting. Over time, the riskiest in-country work concentrates among a small number of freelancers and NGOs, increasing personal risk and making suppression easier as fewer people and organisations are left to target.

* Alieva, Iu., & Bluth, N. (2023). Framing the U.S. and Russia Coverage: The Limited Agency of Foreign Correspondents and the Reproduction of Bias in the News. *Journalism Studies*, *24*(16): 2036-2052.

The aim of this technique is to constrain direct reporting and reduce the supply of verifiable, first-hand information, particularly from Russia itself and from contested or occupied spaces where independent observation matters most. When journalists cannot legally operate, cannot attend briefings, or cannot maintain a bureau, the result is fewer primary interviews, fewer documents obtained in-country, fewer chance encounters, and fewer investigative leads. At the same time, selective access can subtly encourage a more cautious tone—because keeping access becomes an organisational priority, especially for outlets that depend on a presence inside the country for their coverage. The broader logic aligns with what scholarship on accreditation and media privilege warns about: control over who "counts" as a journalist, and who gets access, can become a means of shaping public information without overt censorship.[23]

Impact: The impact on European information production is significant and compounding. When correspondents are removed or blocked, outlets increasingly rely on remote reporting, exiled sources, and open-source intelligence to reconstruct events. This can narrow what can be independently confirmed on the ground and can increase vulnerability to manipulation, gaps in context, and "access asymmetries" (where state narratives are easier to obtain than independent verification)

Taken together, the tactics and techniques discussed in this section:

- Raise the cost and risk of producing independent information on Russia and its activities: financially (SLAPPs, cyber-security), emotionally (harassment, smear campaigns), and physically (espionage and sabotage).

- Shape media markets, especially in more vulnerable regions, so that Kremlin-friendly outlets are structurally advantaged while critical journalism becomes a niche, precarious activity.

- Distort expertise pipelines: young journalists, researchers and activists see the backlash faced by high-profile cases and may avoid certain beats, leaving fewer informed voices over time.

These practices have also driven counter-measures, from EU debates on SLAPP legislation and improved cyber-security support for media, to growing awareness of disinformation and troll operations. From the Kremlin's perspective, however, even a partial chilling effect on European information producers is a strategic success.

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[22] Tambini, D. (2021). What Is Journalism? The Paradox of Media Privilege. *European Human Rights Law Review* (5), 523-539.

[23] Alieva, Iu., & Bluth, N. (2023). Framing the U.S. and Russia Coverage: The Limited Agency of Foreign Correspondents and the Reproduction of Bias in the News. *Journalism Studies*, *24*(16), 2036-2052.

1.2 TTPs of information suppression: production

TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
Undermine the credibility of information producers	Sustained harassment and smear campaigns, intimidation, espionage, exploitation of personal vulnerabilities
Deter investigations into Russian power	SLAPP/Lawfare: the use of expensive defamation and data-protection lawsuits
Interrupt news production at critical moments	Cyber operations: hacking email accounts and content management systems; Distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) attacks; Data destruction or manipulation; "hack and leak" operations
Reshape media markets through economic coercion	Media capture; exploitation of financial vulnerabilities; regulatory manipulation; suppression on digital platforms
Restrict on-the-ground reporting and reliable first-hand information	Control of access to information via visa denials, non-renewals, and accreditation refusals

2. Suppressing Information Dissemination

The second dimension of information suppression concerns the dissemination of information. This section examines how Russia seeks to limit the domestic reach of (undesirable) information produced by independent journalists, activists, political opposition and experts located in- or outside of Russia.

As the previous section has shown, Russia employs an array of techniques that target these information producers directly to silence them or incentivise self-censorship. In parallel, Russia seeks to influence and restrict information dissemination, especially where it concerns control over what information Russian domestic audiences can access. The need to analyse dissemination in order to have a full picture of information suppression and its transnational dimensions follows from the mediated dynamics of how information circulates in societies.

Digital platforms and infrastructures are central to how information is shared and consumed. As a result, they are targeted to control or censor information. Understanding Russian tactics and techniques in this domain is of particular importance for developing effective policy to support the work of Russian independent journalism that largely operates from exile since Russia's hardened repression of media after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the

outlawing of key media outlets. By the end of 2023, Russian media operations in exile totalled 93.[24] To continue their work and reach audiences in Russia, media-in-exile rely on digital infrastructures and services and face manifold challenges. A study based on interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023, for example, found that media-in-exile "use Telegram bots, email subscriptions, and direct messages on social media to avoid state censorship mechanisms, interacting with audiences to secure financial support, fact-check, or gather additional details for ongoing projects."[25]

A growing body of research shows how Russia's strategies to suppress undesirable information have broadened from actions that target the producers of information to actions targeting the information intermediaries that play a crucial role in information dissemination. For example, Russia has suppressed the dissemination of independent news through regulating news aggregators and search engines.[26] In the complex 'multi-stakeholder environment' of online platforms, however, both state actions (such as legislation and political pressure) and platform actions (such as changes in policies or algorithmic recommender systems) may lead to reduced visibility.[27] In the domain of social media, a combination of legislation and forced changes in ownership have strengthened the Russia's capacity to enforce restrictive speech laws.[28] The implementation of the "Sovereign Internet Law" (2019) has resulted in strengthened internet censorship capacities.[29] These were employed first in 2021 to throttle Twitter, and from 2022 to restrict access completely to popular Western social media platforms Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Russia's successful efforts to remove the

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[24] Yablokov, I., & Gatov, V. (2025). Broadcasting through the (new) Iron Curtain: practices, challenges, and legacies of Russia's independent media in exile. *Journalism Studies*, 1-18.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Loveluck, B., & Daucé, F. (2021, May). Codes of conduct in the Russian search industry: the Yandex. News controversy and its aftermath. In *Automation and Data-Driven Journalism Beyond the Western World*; Makhortykh, M., Urman, A., & Wijermars, M. (2022). A story of (non) compliance, bias, and conspiracies: How Google and Yandex represented Smart Voting during the 2021 parliamentary elections in Russia. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *3*(2); Wijermars, M. (2021). Russia's law 'On news aggregators': Control the news feed, control the news?. *Journalism*, *22*(12), 2938-2954.

[27] Dovbysh, O., Wijermars, M., & Makhortykh, M. (2022). How to reach nirvana: Yandex, news personalisation, and the future of Russian journalistic media. *Digital Journalism*, *10*(10), 1855-1874; Makhortykh, M., Urman, A., & Wijermars, M. (2022). A story of (non) compliance, bias, and conspiracies: How Google and Yandex represented Smart Voting during the 2021 parliamentary elections in Russia. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *3*(2).

[28] Dietrich, P. (2023). The Key Player in Russia's Cybersphere: What the West Needs to Know about VK Company. DGAP Analysis No. 4; Knockel, J., Dalek, J., Meletti, L., & Ermoshina, K. (2023). Not OK on VK: An analysis of in-platform censorship on Russia's VKontakte. Citizen Lab Report No. 169; Lokot, T., & Wijermars, M. (2021, November 24). Russia's Social Media Self-Censorship Law is Misguided – and the West Must Avoid Making the Same Mistake. CEPA.

[29] Ermoshina, K., Loveluck, B., & Musiani, F. (2022). A market of black boxes: The political economy of Internet surveillance and censorship in Russia. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *19*(1), 18-33; Burkhardt, F., & Wijermars, M. (2022). Digital Authoritarianism and Russia's War Against Ukraine: How Sanctions-induced Infrastructural Disruptions are Reshaping Russia's Repressive Capacities. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, *42*(2), 21-43.

Smart Voting app from the Google and Apple app stores in 2021, was a first illustration of how censorship may also occur through non-speech intermediary services,[30] yet research on this this aspect of transnational information suppression and the responsibility of app stores and other intermediary service providers remains limited.

In parallel, Russia has designated an increasing number of individual journalists and media organisations as "foreign agents," a repressive tool which impacts similarly extend beyond Russia's borders and have become increasingly severe. In addition to the reputational damage and bureaucratic requirements that come with this designation and the expanding set of restrictions on civic rights connected to it (in line with the techniques discussed in Section 1), it also places restrictions on the dissemination of information produced by "foreign agents" and introduces consequences for interacting with them.

The designation "undesirable organisation," which is also used to silence media organisations along with their contributors and sources, is more far-reaching: it makes all operations within the Russian Federation illegal. Like the "foreign agent" designation, the restrictions extend to the dissemination of information produced by these organisations, and interactions with or contributions to them. When used against a media organisation, the operational goal of this designation is clear: to isolate and prevent information produced by undesirable organisations from being disseminated, including by others. Since it incentivises users to limit their (public) engagement with materials published by undesirable organisations, this has the secondary effect of dampening algorithmic amplification.[31]

The list of organisations designated as "undesirable" since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine includes Russian-exiled media, such as iStories (2022), The Insider (2022), Meduza (2022), Novaya Gazeta Europe (2023), TV Rain (2023) and The Moscow Times (2024), international media(-related) organisations, including the Global Investigative Journalism Network (2023), RFE/RL (2024), as well as academic, civil society and policy-oriented organisations with Russian, European and American origins, such as Chatham House (2022), Riddle (2022), Agora (2023), Central European University (2023), Dekoder (2024), Freedom House (2024) and Article 19 (2024).

Russian independent media's forced reliance on social media and other online intermediaries, exacerbated by conditions of exile, exposes them to continuously changing vulnerabilities resulting from platform policies and governance (e.g. algorithmic ranking and moderation). The following section reviews key changes in the legal environment in 2024-2025 and their impact,

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[30] Lokot, T., & Wijermars, M. (2021). The Kremlin forced US tech firms to shut down an app some Russian voters hoped to use. Now what?. The Washington Post, Monkey Cage Blog. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/30/kremlin-forced-us-tech-firms-shut-down-an-app-its-opponents-were-using-now-what/.

[31] Yablokov, I., & Gatov, V. (2025). Broadcasting through the (new) Iron Curtain: practices, challenges, and legacies of Russia's independent media in exile. *Journalism Studies*, 1-18.

before shifting attention to how platform governance shapes Russia's ability to control information dissemination across its borders. The analysis also touches upon how secondary effects of Western sanctions[32] may lead to or reinforce transnational information suppression.

2.1 Legislation and platform governance (2024-2025)

Russia has further intensified is efforts to control information dissemination within Russia. In 2024, these efforts focused on video hosting platform YouTube. Many independent media had come to rely on YouTube to reach audiences in Russia after their websites, along with Western social media platforms Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, had been blocked.[33] Starting from July 2024, Russian efforts to throttle the platform – likely targeting Google Global Cache (GGC) servers installed on the networks of Russian internet service providers – have made the platform near impossible to use. According to Google's transparency reporting, YouTube traffic originating from Russia near halved by August 2024, and halved again by January 2025.[34] It is commonly assumed that the choice to throttle, rather than block YouTube, was related to its integration in Google's digital ecosystem: "blocking the platform could cause widespread disruption of other services such as maps, cloud storage, and – most importantly – Android, the dominant mobile operating system in Russia".[35] The restrictions have benefitted Russian competitor VK video, which saw its audience increase to 41 million daily visitors by January 2025.[36] In August 2024, Russia also blocked access to messaging app Signal, followed by Discord and Viber later that year. Russia has also stepped up its efforts to limit the availability and use of VPNs that enable citizens to circumvent censorship. Since March 2024, it is prohibited to share information on how to circumvent internet restrictions, including on VPN

[32] Watson, L. (2024, December 2). Sanctions Were Meant to Stop Russian Propaganda. They're Hurting Vital Journalism Too. Columbia Journalism Review. https://www.cjr.org/world/sanctions-were-meant-to-stop-russian-propaganda-theyre-hurting-vital-journalism-too.php.

[33] Yablokov, I., & Gatov, V. (2025). Broadcasting through the (new) Iron Curtain: practices, challenges, and legacies of Russia's independent media in exile. *Journalism Studies*, 1-18.

[34] This number cannot, however, be taken as an indication that Russian's stopped accessing YouTube: those using a VPN service are not included in this statistic. https://transparencyreport.google.com/traffic/overview?hl=en&fraction_traffic=start:1703980800000;end:1767484799999;product:21;region:RU&lu=fraction_traffic

[35] Epifanova, A. (2025, February 25). Rubezh YouTube. Kak prodvigaetsia bor'ba Kremlia za kontrol' nad internetom. Carnegie Politika. https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/russia-youtube-block-attempt?lang=en.

[36] TASS (2025, January 16). VK Video obognal YouTube po chislu pol'zovatelei v den' novogodnie prazdniki. https://tass.ru/ekonomika/22893385.

services that enable users to access blocked resources. By August 2025, the register of resources blocked on this ground included over 1000 entries.[37]

Measures were also taken to limit anonymity on social media and messaging apps. Since 1 November 2024, the owners of social media accounts and public channels on messaging apps with an audience of over 10.000 users are required to submit their personal details to Roskomnadzor, the federal agency tasked with maintaining a register of these accounts.[38] The law also prohibits accounts and public channels that fail to register with Roskomnadzor to place paid advertisements or share ways of financing their activities. In addition to depriving unregistered accounts and channels from income-generation in this way, the law prohibits sharing information from such unregistered public accounts. This creates a disincentive for (secondary) sharing of information, in a similar way to the restrictions imposed on sharing information produced by foreign agents and undesirable organisations. This pattern confirms Russia recognises the importance of targeting information dissemination as part of information suppression.

In 2025, Russian efforts accelerated to curtail the use of foreign messaging apps and, instead, promote the use of government-controlled alternatives, particularly Max, the messaging app developed by VK. The latter, imagined as a 'super app' similar to China's WeChat, was launched in spring 2025. Since then, users have noted disruptions in the availability of popular messengers WhatsApp and Telegram. In August, Roskomnadzor confirmed the restriction of voice and video calls through both services, claiming their use in fraud and recruitment to commit terrorist acts.[39] As users indicated the limited availability of both messengers, Roskomnadzor confirmed their partial restriction (i.e., the apps as a whole).[40] On 28 November, Roskomnadzor announced a gradual imposition of restrictions on WhatsApp and warned it could be blocked entirely, if it would continue to act in violation of Russian law. According to Roskomnadzor, "[t]he messenger is used to organise and carry out terrorist activities on [Russian territory, to recruit their perpetrators, [and] for fraudulent and other crimes against our citizens."[41] On 4 December 2025, Russia blocked SnapChat and Apple Facetime

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[37] Roskomsvoboda (2025, August 7). Kolichestvo zablokirovannykh za obkhod blokirovok prevysilo 1000. https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/russia-blocks-more-than-870-sites-on-vpn-and-censorship-bypass/.

[38] Roskomsvoboda (2024, August 8). Podpisan bol'shoi paket zapretitl'nykh i reguliruiushchikh onlain-prostranstvo zakonov. https://roskomsvoboda.org/ru/post/putin-podpasal-simki-reestr-prizyvnikov-deanon-mayning/.

[39] Meduza (2025, August 13). Roskomnadzor ofitsial'no ob''iavil o "chastichnom ogranichenii" zvonkov v Telegram i WhatsApp. https://meduza.io/news/2025/08/13/roskomnadzor-ob-yavil-o-chastichnom-ogranichenii-zvonkov-v-telegram-i-whatsapp.

[40] Meduza (2025, October 22). Roskomnadzor "chastichno ogranichil" WhatsApp i Telegram. https://meduza.io/feature/2025/10/22/roskomnadzor-chastichno-ogranichil-whatsapp-i-telegram-v-34-regionah-rossii-messendzhery-rabotayut-so-sboyami-ili-vovse-ne-otkryvayutsya.

[41] Meduza (2025, November 28). Roskomnadzor predupredil o polnoi blokirovke WhatsApp. https://meduza.io/news/2025/11/28/roskomnadzor-predupredil-o-polnoy-blokirovke-whatsapp-v-rossii.

on the same grounds. The latter had been one of the alternatives to the voice call functionality of WhatsApp and Telegram restricted in August 2025. In February 2026, users again noted mass disruptions in the availability of Telegram and Whatsapp, giving rise to concerns both messengers could be blocked soon.[42]

Alongside the restrictions, Russia encourages users to transition to Max. From 1 September 2025, Max was added to the list of apps that need to be pre-installed on mobile and other devices sold in Russia, replacing VK messenger (Russian Appstore RuStore was also added). Russia also limits the use of SMS to for identification purposes to log in to Gosuslugi, the online portal for governmental services, when using the service on a mobile device because of the vulnerability of SMS-verification in identity fraud.[43] Russians officials have encouraged citizens to transition the group chats of their apartment buildings from WhatsApp or Telegram to Max.[44] In December 2025, the Russian State Duma passed amendments to the Russian Federation Housing Code requiring, e.g., utility companies and house management companies to communicate with the owners and tenants of apartments exclusively through Max.[45] Phasing out SMS identification and replacing it with identification through the Max messenger is also under discussion for banking services.[46] Combined, these measures make it increasingly difficult for Russians to avoid the use of the app and normalise its use for everyday communications. In June 2025, Russia, furthermore, passed a law stipulating the creation of a Russian official messaging platform to facilitate citizen interactions with government, municipal and other services, including for identification and authentication purposes and digital signatures.[47] Based on the criteria for the service provider stipulated in the law, Max would be a key candidate for acquiring the function of official messaging platform.

Another prohibition that came into force on 1 September 2025 should be understood in the context of incentivising a full transition to domestic platforms. It prohibits any form of advertisement on online resources that are designated undesirable or extremist. This is clearly aimed at curtailing advertisement activities on Instagram and Facebook (Meta was designated

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[42] Meduza (2026, February 14). Rossiiskie vlasti prodolzhaiut lomoat' telegram i votsap. https://meduza.io/feature/2026/02/14/rossiyskie-vlasti-prodolzhayut-lomat-telegram-i-votsap

[43] Meduza (2025, December 5). Pol'zovateli pozhalovalis', chto ne mozhet zajti na Gosuslugi bez ustanovki messendzhera Max. https://meduza.io/news/2025/12/05/polzovateli-pozhalovalis-chto-ne-mogut-zayti-na-gosuslugi-bez-ustanovki-messendzhera-max.

[44] Meduza (2025, December 6). Zhiteliam Rossii nachali rasslylat' uvedomleniia o perevode domovykh chatov v messendzher Max. https://meduza.io/news/2025/12/06/bezopasnyy-nadezhnyy-rabotaet-pri-blokirovke-interneta-zhitelyam-rossii-nachali-rassylat-uvedomleniya-o-perevode-domovyh-chatov-v-messendzher-max.

[45] Meduza (2025, December 16).Gosduma priniala zakon o perevode domovykh chatov v messendzher Max. https://meduza.io/news/2025/12/16/gosduma-prinyala-zakon-o-perevode-domovyh-chatov-v-messendzher-max.

[46] Kommersant. (2025, December 17). Soobshcheniia po minimumu. Dlia uvedomleniia klientov bankam planiruetsia predlozhit' Max. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/8293526?from=top_main_1.

[47] Roskomsvoboda (2025, June 24). Podpisan zakon o sozdanii rossiiskogo gosmessendzhera. https://roskomsvoboda.org/en/post/russian-official-messaging-platform-mandated/.

an extremist organisation in 2022), which has continued (e.g. through product placement) despite the blocking of both services in Russia. Redirecting advertisement revenues to state-controlled platforms, in particular VK, and thereby incentivising content producers to transition their activities to these platforms, appears to be the motivation for this measure.

As mentioned above, Russia previously passed legislation that enabled it to influence the search results generated by search engines. On 1 September 2025, a law came into force that introduced an administrative penalty for *searching* for extremist and terrorist information online (punishable with a fine of 3000-5000 Rubles). The same law also prohibited advertising the use of VPN and other services used to circumvent internet censorship (with fines up to 80.000 Rubles for individuals and up to 500.000 Rubles for organisations). In December, the first Russian was sentenced to pay a fine based on the new law, on the accusation of searching for information about Russian voluntary battalions in the Ukrainian army.[48] While the law concerns accessing materials that are included in the list of prohibited extremist and terrorist materials, its potential impact gives rise to concern. For example, organisations designated as extremist in Russia currently include the Anti-Corruption Foundation and Meta.

The law presents a marked shift in the logic of internet censorship in Russia. While in the past restrictive laws targeted particular information dissemination services to pressure these into cooperation or block them, the *use* of such services was not illegal (e.g., using blocked social media platforms, such as Instagram). Sharing information produced by undesirable organisations, such as Meduza, the media organisation operating from Latvia since 2014, was previously made punishable with a fine. The law thus signals a shift in approach and intensification of the repression of *information search* activities. An additional complicating factor, and risk in how the law may be enforced, is the extensive integration of algorithmic recommendation systems in the online information environment and how, as a result, user agency should be understood in online search.

Efforts to restrict VPN services that enable circumvention of internet restrictions continued in 2025, now expanding from blocking particular VPN services to blocking widely used VPN protocols.[49] The removal of many VPN apps from Apple's Russia App Store, some 20% of which has been done without public acknowledgement, raises concern about the role of foreign tech companies in facilitating internet censorship in Russia.[50]

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[48] Meduza (2025, December 10). Sud v Rossii vpervye vypisal shtraf za poisk "ekstremistskogo" kontenta. https://meduza.io/news/2025/12/10/sud-v-rossii-vpervye-vypisal-shtraf-za-poisk-ekstremistskogo-kontenta.
[49] Epifanova, A. (2025, February 25). Rubezh YouTube. Kak prodvigaetsia bor'ba Kremlia za kontrol' nad internetom. Carnegie Politika. https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/02/russia-youtube-block-attempt?lang=en.
[50] AppleCensorship (2024, September 24). Apple is Silently Removing VPN Apps from Russia's App Store. https://applecensorship.com/news/apple-is-silently-removing-vpn-apps-from-russias-app-store.

The Russian legislation and legal actions discussed in this section also have transnational implications that affect and suppress information dissemination. Platforms companies have a mixed record when it comes to preventing the transnational application of repressive acts and human rights violations. In the transnational dimension of information suppression, how information suppression targeting dissemination can work through both speech- and non-speech-related intermediaries and systems becomes even more apparent. Whereas social media and search engines are important targets for online censorship, indirect silencing works through faciliatory platforms, systems or services such as app stores, payment systems, or hosting services. In the transnational dimension of information suppression, the role of the private sector – in terms of its potential capacity to prevent or mitigate information suppression activities – is also greater. While those journalists, activists and experts whose information Russia seeks to suppress and who are located abroad, have been quite successful in developing (technical) means for circumventing infrastructural restrictions, this requires continuous resources and efforts as Russia continues to expand its censoring capacities (e.g., regarding VPNs).

Understanding the information dissemination dimension of transnational information suppression requires a multi-actor and socio-technical perspective; a perspective that comprises state actions, platform policies, technical infrastructures and users and seeks to understand how their (inter)actions result in limiting the spread of information produced by individuals, groups and organizations that are seen as a threat to Russia's regime.

2.2 TTPs of information suppression: dissemination

TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
Limit the domestic reach of (undesirable) information produced by independent journalists, activists, political opposition and experts located in- our outside of Russia	Reputational damage and creating risks for (secondary) sharing of information through legislation and legal action affecting dissemination (e.g., foreign agents, undesirable organisation, extremist organisation; legislation targeting search engines, news aggregators, social media)
	'Indirect' silencing through infrastructure: repressive impact of policy (implementation) by app stores and other online intermediaries within and outside of Russia
Increase control over information dissemination infrastructures within Russia	(Changes in) Ownership of Russian information intermediaries (e.g., VK, Yandex)
	Political and legal action to pressure foreign online platforms to comply with repressive legislation
	Throttling, blocking
	Restrict internet censorship circumvention tools

3. Managing information salience through dis- and malinformation: The Case of Estonia

This section addresses the third dimension of information suppression as a form of FIMI: techniques that work through influencing the salience of information. It understands the management of information salience as a combination of tactics and techniques that aim to boost the visibility, credibility and popularity of specific types of textual and visual sources of knowledge about current events and their interpretations through particular political frames. Managing salience implies amplifying the public resonance of the supported narratives and promoting them as being politically relevant and morally superior to competing information products and alternative voices. This is done, for example, by emphasising certain issues and de-emphasising others, regularly reiterating focal points of debate, raising the emotional tone of news coverage, and connecting matters of high geopolitics with the everyday routine. Salience can also be achieved by spreading distorted and politically biased information, the incorrect use of concepts, selective presentation of facts and avoidance of issues that may undermine the established frames.

This section is methodologically based on netnography,[51] a sub-discipline that uses digital and networked data collection through online resources, which enriches the researcher's empirical toolkit with Internet-based textual and visual sources, including social media publications and vlogs. The section outlines the key discursive strategies employed by Russian and pro-Russian propaganda in Estonia, placed in the context of specific practices of communicating with Russophone audiences. It is based on an examination of textual and visual sources, including media publications, vlogs and official documents. It argues that Russia's self-proclaimed role as a protector and defender of its "compatriots living abroad" is a political construct that was built and matured based on a multiplicity of discourses, including those that originated from Russophone minorities.

The Estonian Russophone sphere produces multiple narratives. Within these, identification with the "Russian world" (see Introduction) implies cultural dissociation from Estonia and Europe. More nuanced versions portray Russian speakers as an inalienable – yet specific – part of the Estonian political community or place them in a zone of double non-belonging: as being alienated from (and abandoned by) both Russia and Estonia. Some of these narrators display Soviet nostalgia and social conservatism rather than direct loyalty to the Russian Federation. Their aspirational discourses, appealing to Russia for help and assistance, contributed to the creation of a discursive niche: a speaking position that Moscow eventually

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[51] Kozinets, R. (2006). Netnography 2.0. In R.W. Belk (Ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

instrumentalised, weaponised and integrated in its concepts of its "near abroad" and the "Russian world" to legitimise interfering into the domestic affairs of neighbouring countries. Therefore, pro-Kremlin and Putin-sympathetic narratives in Estonia should be understood as a combination of home-grown voices reflecting the perspective of a significant part of the local Russophone population and direct projections of Russian propaganda.

This also explains the hybrid nature of these narratives. Arguments that are promoted as business-like pragmatism may merge with conspiratorial thinking. The ensuing self-victimisation, expressed through these narratives, produces an alternative normativity, which requires close engagement with Russian mainstream media. Our analysis shows how there is ample space for narratives borrowed from the Kremlin-controlled media within this diverse discursive sphere, and adjusted for local consumption, as well as for narratives that have been locally produced yet are closely tied to the "Russian world" ideology. Understanding this hybridity is important to avoid describing Russia's communicative relations with its diaspora in Estonia as unilateral and linear. Role identities of both sides are mutually dependent and reciprocal, and the connections between them are inter-textual and inter-discursive. Both elements of this binary – Russia as the "protector" of its "compatriots" abroad and these "compatriots" themselves – are dependent on each other and can politically exist only in conjuncture with each other.

3.1 Before 2022: Key developments

3.1.1 Tactics

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian policies were aimed at preserving a Russian language "bubble" in Estonia and thereby segregating Estonian society. The "Russian World" doctrine, which should be understood as an imperial construct, has been an important instrument in Russia's efforts to enhance polarisation and deepen dividing lines within Estonian society. Russophone groups were the object of the Kremlin's weaponisation of (mis)information as part of its information operations aimed to sow division within the Baltics and between the Baltic States and their NATO and EU allies, as well as to destabilise the Estonian political system.[52]

Cleavages between the culturally dominant Estonian national majority and the Russophone minority are not only inherited from the Soviet past, but have also been intentionally amplified by Russian propaganda. They are also supported by pro-Russian voices within Estonia that

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[52] See the website of the research project "Relational Approach to Strategic History Narrative": https://www.rashina.ut.ee/about/.

seek to capitalise politically on this polarity by portraying Estonian Russophones as a distinct community, allegedly characterised by conservative values, respectful attitudes toward the Soviet past, negative perceptions of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika policies of the late 1980s and their effects in the 1990s, and support for Russia's spill-over beyond the Russian borders. The position they are claimed to share also includes disdain for international organisations created by the West, scepticism towards refugees, and the idea that small countries, such as Estonia, are existentially vulnerable and dependent upon their stronger neighbours for protection. Combined, these narratives serve the purpose of broadening the gaps between the Russian(-speaking) minority and the Estonian majority and preventing Russian-speakers from integrating into Europe by locking them in within an information milieu shaped by Russia[53].

Russian efforts to manage information salience have aimed to maintain a high level of information consumption of – and demand for – Russia-controlled sources, as opposed to Estonian and European media outlets. This tactic exploits the fact that a significant part of the Russian-speaking population sympathises with the idea of a "great Russia" that can protect its "compatriots" living abroad, and that many Estonian Russophones perceive Russia as a market or potential source of business transactions. Russia-sympathetic narratives, ostensibly articulated on behalf of the "ordinary people" who are concerned with their everyday lives, often conceal their co-dependency on the Kremlin discourse that claims that Estonian politics deviates from "normal" European rules related to minority languages. In Estonia, the Russia-controlled media toolkit includes standard accusations of discrimination against the Russophone population, while claiming Estonia is dependent on and subjugated to the EU and NATO.

This tactic goes in parallel with the aim to undermine trust in Estonian information sources by claiming they are unreliable, misleading, indecent, morally corrupt, "fascist", or Russophobic, thus promoting emotions of disdain and disgust[54]. Estonian statehood is often depicted as "unsovereign," while Estonian politicians are stigmatised as being inefficient and inherently dependent on "the West".

In contrast, Russian interpretations of international politics are given a high priority. The narrative chain of Russian "cognitive propaganda," in summary, comprises three main elements: (a) normalisation of Russian foreign policy in a historical context of relations with the West; which implies (b) a great-power-management structure of international politics and legitimizes the implicitly imperial content of the Russian World doctrine; which (c) is based on business-like relations built on material profits rather than norms.

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[53] This trend was identified by the Estonian Security Police already in 2002, see: Annual Review 2002. KaPo web site, available at https://kapo.ee/sites/default/files/content_page_attachments/Annual%20Review%202002.pdf
[54] Ben-Nun Bloom, P. (2014). Disgust, harm, and morality in politics. *Political Psychology*, *35*(4), 495-513.

By the same token, Russian efforts aim to silence inconvenient or uncomfortable topics to redirect attention from major to peripheral issues. This silencing implies the selective distribution of information, blockage and filtering out of narratives that undermine Russian mainstream interpretations. Information selectivity is based on different manipulative techniques that endeavour to marginalise and sideline voices of speakers whose arguments and explanations do not fit in with the dominant propaganda. The most frequent objects of silencing are historical facts (such as the USSR – Germany cooperation in 1939-1941) and issues of international law that are substituted by "the right of the strongest".

3.1.2 Techniques

To achieve these aims, Russia has employed various techniques of information salience management that comprise both practical policies and narratives.

The practical policies include a spectrum of "cultural" or "public diplomacy" and "soft power" measures that have functioned as influence operations. Since 1991, several institutions operated in Estonia that can be considered as representative of the "Russian World" and served the purpose of attaching the Russian ethnic, linguistic and religious diasporas to Russia. The Center of Russian Culture mainly functioned as a cultural space that positioned itself as a meeting point for different ethnic and linguistic groups living in Estonia, with a clear emphasis on sustaining Russophone culture.[55] The Pushkin Institute offered courses and programs in Russian language,[56] advertised studies in Russia, and organised competitions among the youth dedicated to the National Day of Russia. The Institute was previously affiliated with the Russian World (*Russkyi Mir*) Foundation, and its web site contained direct links to the Kremlin-associated 'Russian World' magazine.

The Impressum Club

Until 2020, the *Impressum* Club in Tallinn functioned as a platform for Russian and pro-Russian media propagandists. It regularly organized and advertised public events aimed at reproducing the Kremlin's narratives for Russophone audiences in Estonia. *Impressum* was originally designed as an inherently political project. Its funders, the *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* journalists Igor Teterin and Galina Sapozhniko, admitted that it was the spirit of the Bronze Soldier Night in 2007 that defined the mission of their brainchild. *Impressum* operated in close conjunction with Russia-supported media. For example, *Sputnik Estonia* regularly popularised events organised by *Impressum* and disseminated interviews with its guest speakers. The Club also conducted political activities, for example the essay competition "Long Memory" about the "happy pages" in Russian – Estonian relations. This gave reason to Estonian policy- and opinion-makers to accuse *Impressum* of being politically biased and of partaking in Russia's information war against Estonia, as well as of engaging in shadow financial schemes to fund its events.

The "Russian World" doctrine[57] provides the overarching structure to transform groups of Estonian residents and citizens of Russian descent into a political resource structured along

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[55] Khmyrov, A. (2013, September 26). Prem'era fil'ma v Tsenre russkoi kul'tury. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsZ8k507Grs.

[56] Tallinn Pushkin Institute. https://pushkin.ee/ru/

[57] Aver'ianov, V. (2016, September 26). Доктрина Русского мира. https://izborsk-club.ru/10269.

the lines of its templates (e.g., claims related to the alleged discrimination of Russian speakers in the Baltic states) to create pretexts for Russian interference. Apart from its symbolic and rhetorical dimensions, this technique blended into Russian hybrid warfare against the Baltic states[58]: starting from mid-1990s, Russia's information manipulations were complemented by economic sanctions in the form of a doubling of tariffs on imports from Estonia as retaliation for what Moscow considered oppression of Baltic Russian-speakers.

The mobilisation of contacts between Russian political elites and Estonian politicians complements this technique. In Estonia, the voting behaviour of the Russophone community was and remains traditionally centre left, with the Centre Party (*Keskerakond*)[59] as the main political beneficiary of the Russian speakers' vote and functioning as a partner of the Kremlin through its ruling "United Russia" party. Instrumentalizing Russian World-related rhetoric, Russia seeks to exert control over Russian speakers' political sympathies as electoral capital to influence the political landscape of Estonia.

Another technique concerns Russia's intentions to incite Russophones to protest actions, which creates societal visibility. The removal of the Soviet-era Bronze Soldier monument from downtown Tallinn to a military cemetery in 2007, followed by several days of brutal protests by pro-Kremlin activists, illustrates Moscow's capitalisation on its investments in enhancing the salience of the Russian World ideology.[60] The latter functions as a force aimed at the destabilisation of the statehood of "unfriendly countries". These events accelerated the Kremlin's portrayal of Estonia as a xenophobic and neo-Nazi-friendly country, and thus as "false Europeans" (to borrow from Iver Neumann[61]) who don't comply with EU regulations concerning minority protection, tolerance and multi-culturalism. According to this narrative, post-Soviet Estonia pays a dear price for the EU's and NATO's policies of regime change and democracy promotion in the non-Western world. The Moscow-oriented riots had a practical effect: for some time, they prevented Estonian politicians from making further steps toward introducing Estonian-language education due to the fear of radicalising the Russia-oriented segment of local Russian-speakers.

Based on our research, we find that Russia-promoted narratives before 2022 were an opportunistic and trans-ideological mixture of historical, geopolitical, and economic arguments that embraced storylines from the left and the right of the political spectrum and gave the floor to peripheral and marginal voices. This structural heterogeneity distinguishes this type of

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[58] See proceedings of the research project "National identity and Estonian-Russian relations: a longitudinal study of elite and mass discourses": https://dspace.ut.ee/collections/ca11e91c-483c-4f5b-862d-a6303d63a645.

[59] Keskerakond. https://keskerakond.ee/.

[60] International Centre for Defence and Security (2020, August 24). The Bronze Soldier Crisis of 2007: Revisiting an Early Case of Hybrid Conflict. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZV_5gukA7Y.

[61] Neumann, Iver B. "Russia's return as true Europe, 1991–2017." *Conflict and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017): 78-91.

"cognitive propaganda"[62] from Soviet ideology; rather, it manifests as a multifarious agglomeration of reference points matching different anti-Western and illiberal political worldviews within the Estonian Russophone population.

By the same token, Russian and Russia-friendly narratives constantly shifted from rationalised (de-politicised, pragmatic, often grounded in material considerations) to emotionalised (subjective, biased, and overtly confrontational) arguments. In most cases, emotional and rational narratives were not separated from each other but, rather, closely intertwined. This mélange attests to the hybrid nature of Russian "cognitive propaganda," which cannot function without strong emotional investments. Yet, in the meantime, the affective components in many cases undermine the credibility of rational reasoning and compromise the integrity of the Russia-promoted narratives.

3.2 After 2022

Russia's war on Ukraine reignited the old lines of division and alienation between Estonian mainstream politics and the Russian minority. At the same time, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has drastically transformed relations between the promotors of the "Russian world" doctrine and their clientele in Estonia and complicated the external projection of the Kremlin's narratives. Russia, the key reference point for a large part of Estonian Russophones, proved to be the aggressor in the military conflict. As a result, all references to the 'Russian world', even if formulated in cultural or civilisational terms, became toxic and securitised, while Estonian public opinion has displayed a strong sense of moral solidarity with the victims of this aggression. The ultimate transition to Estonian-language education, the discontinuation of cultural and academic contacts with Russian institutions, and the renaming of the Russian Cultural Centre in Tallinn are examples of this cultural and civilisational distancing. In practice, two types of "red lines" were drawn: "soft" red lines (social: public criticism of in-between manoeuvring and vacillation between loyalty to Estonia and sympathies to Russia) and "hard" red lines (criminalisation by the state of public pronouncements justifying the war, Russian violence and aggression). In the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Estonian state introduced bordering measures towards Russia, including the recognition of Russia as a terrorist state by the Estonian parliament, the cancellation of travel to Estonia for Russian holders of Schengen visas, the discontinuation of academic and cultural contacts with partners in Russia, the military fortification of the border and bans on Russian media and social media platforms spreading propaganda supportive of Russia's military campaign against Ukraine (including RTR-Planeta, RTVI, Rossiya 24, REN TV, and NTV Mir).

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[62] Makarychev, Andrey. "Russian "cognitive propaganda": the case of Impressum Club in Tallinn." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2021): 45-64.

After 2022, the narratives produced by many local Russophones and circulating on social media softly distanced themselves from the Russian official discourse, yet usually refrained from openly expressing solidarity with Ukraine and have been hesitant to condemn the Putin regime. Such a shift reflects a search for a de-politicised niche to prevent Estonian Russophones from accusations of being Putin's proxies, and to remain a legitimate part of the Estonian society. At the same time, the post-2022 narratives inherited critical attitudes to the Estonian nation state as linguo-centric and divisive from the preceding years, and advocacy for an autonomous Russified normative space with its own memory politics, language, religion and educational practices. Within this logic, language is presented as an organic part of the existence of Estonian Russophones that can't be easily altered. These arguments often lead to Russophone narratives adopting a confrontational rhetoric towards Estonian authorities. A 'Russian-world'-oriented blogger, for example, referred to the Estonian-language educational reform as "a rude and sadistic attempt to deprive Russian people of their national identity and convert them into Estonians," and claimed "[t]his won't happen not only because we, Russians, don't want this, but also because this type of parochial nationalism of the past does not exist anywhere in Europe"[63]. Argued from such a position, narratives accuse the Estonian state of underfunding medicine and education, and underinvesting into local industry.

Since 2022, previous tactics of managing information salience to Russia's advantage (retention of Russian language information "bubble" consonant to Kremlin narratives and aimed at undermining trust in Estonian information space, paralleled by silencing of voices challenging the "Russian world" doctrine) were complemented by the new narrative of normalising the Russo-Ukrainian war and denying insecurities produced by it.

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[63] Kutaev, O. (2024, September 12). Mnenie: o perekhode na estonski**j** **j**azyk obuchen**ij**a. *Infosyla*. https://infosila.ee/main/3569-mnenie-o-perehode-na-estonskiy-yazyk-obucheniya.html.

3.2.1 Tactics

Normalisation of war has become a prominent tactic. It works by focusing the attention of information consumers on routine issues of everyday human existence (consumption, employment, finances, labour market, etc.), depoliticising war, and rejecting geopolitical interpretations of war. It serves to discourage readers and viewers from assessing the realities of war and, instead, incentivises them to immerse themselves into everyday life. Ultimately, such narratives are shared with the aim to deprive the Russophone population of a sense of agency by creating a picture of the world in which they are unable to influence the course of events.[64]

This tactic is grounded in a combination of different logics of de-securitization that are meant to subvert the normative foundations of Estonia's international standing, particularly towards Ukraine. This type of manipulative narration no longer draws on the projection of the "Russian world" ideology. Rather it is presented as being a grassroots alternative worldview: down-to-earth voices that claim to represent a pragmatic alternative to the Estonia's current foreign policy.[65]

Threat denial is a key component of the normalisation tactic. It seeks to deny Russia poses a threat and, instead, portray the EU, Ukraine and the Estonian government as the main sources of insecurities for Estonia.[66] In this substitution, sanctions, border restrictions and military expenditures are reframed as being detrimental for Estonia and providing assistance to Ukraine is claimed to be futile ("Don't provoke Russia" as a recipe for Estonia's survival).

3.2.2 Techniques

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some of the previous techniques – such as public diplomacy and fostering contacts with Russian public officials – lost their salience, while mobilisation for specific actions took more targeted forms. Russia has intensified infiltration into Estonian public spaces, including media, communication, education, civil

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[64] The effects of this tactic on ordinary Estonian Russophones were illustratively demonstrated in the Estonian documentary "Out of the Bubble" (ERR TV company, 2025). In five episodes, it visually documented the conversational narratives of a Russian speaking married couple from the county of Ida-Virumaa who, in accordance with the scenario, travelled to war-torn Ukraine to personally see its devastating effects. This media experiment of escaping the "bubble" of pro-Russian narratives ended with the protagonists' voluntary return to the depoliticized sphere of everyday life purified from war-related connotations. https://jupiter.err.ee/1609789553/mullist-valja.

[65] This tactic is particularly visible in the Russian language vlogs by Estonian artist Neeme Lall, an admirer of Vladimir Putin and supporter of the invasion of Ukraine. https://www.youtube.com/@naatsaretlane.

[66] Bilingual artist Juri Kivit, for example, regularly shares ironic and sarcastic videos in Russian on his YouTube channel about the alleged incompetence of the Estonian government, its dependence on the EU, as well as "Russophobia." Produced by an Estonian citizen, these vlogs intentionally amplify Eurosceptic attitudes among local Russophones and expand the space for pro-Russian narratives. https://www.youtube.com/@JuriKivit.

society and defence institutions in order to adapt information salience to much more conflictual relations with the EU and NATO. This technique builds upon Russia's hybrid warfare activities, yet has significantly extended its scope after 2022.

Russia offered direct and indirect support for the creation of the openly pro-Russian political party *"Koos / Vmeste"*. The party was led by Aivo Peterson, who was sentenced to 14 years in prison for national betrayal in 2025, and Oleg Ivanov, who fled to Russia in 2023 and is wanted by Estonian authorities for embezzlement.

"*Koos / Vmeste*" was formed in 2022 and promoted several narratives aligning with the Kremlin's discourse.[67] The first narrative advocates for a "business-as-usual" type of Russia-centric pragmatism. In their public statements, Peterson and Ivanov argued that EU sanctions against Russia should be lifted because of their harmful effect on the Estonian economy,[68] and claimed Estonia was artificially dragged into the war.[69] This type of rhetoric was used to position "*Koos / Vmeste*" as a reasonable interlocutor with Russia and a "party of peace" that cares about Estonia's survival amidst global geopolitical crisis.[70]

The second, counter-normative, narrative challenges the model of Estonian nation state for being ethno-centric, nationalist and unfriendly towards Russian-speakers. "*Koos / Vmeste*," proclaiming itself "Estonian patriots,"[71] called the demolition of Soviet military monuments after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine "a provocation," and called upon all Estonians to learn from Russian speakers how to respect their history and identity.[72] YouTube channels such as "Pereulki Tallinna"[73] and "Baltika Zdravomysliia"[74] regularly disseminate similar narratives.

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[67] KOOS channel on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@koos5056.

[68] Ivanov, O. (2022, July 5). Lider estonskogo Dvizheniia za mir KOOS/VMESTE Aivo Peterson o provale i prekrashchenii politiki soanktsii. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2vFkfODQYA

[69] Ivanov, O. (2022, June 29). Lider estonskogo Dvizheniia za mir Aivo Peterson o voine. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enUZ6fWj5UM

[70] ESN. (2022, September 9). 0.09.2022 priamoi efir Aivo Peterson VS Aleksandr Aleksandrin: Chto takoe dvizhenie KOOS. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGbV_CWsJZ8

[71] Ivanov, O. (2022, September 16). Obrashchenie liderov Dvizheniia KOOS/VMESTE Olega Ivanova i Aivo Petersona. Video ot 12.09.2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qh21_cnuD94

[72] KOOS (2022, August 7). Aivo Peterson Narva tank T-34-85. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYCoCmsBFFU

[73] https://www.youtube.com/@Pereulki.Tallinn

[74] https://www.youtube.com/@baltikazdravomysliya

A series of legal cases brought by the Estonian state in recent years illustrates the scope of Russian interest in influencing the Estonian information space. These include:

- The indictment for national treason of Svetlana Burtseva, an Estonian citizen who worked in the media groups "Rossiya Segodnya", "Sputnik Eesti" and Baltnews[1] in 2024. The court accused Burtseva of circumventing sanctions, spreading false information damaging Estonia's security and collaborating with the Russian security services (FSB).

- In 2025, Oleg Besedin, a pro-Kremlin activist, vlogger and media influencer, was arrested for "non-violent actions aimed against Estonian national security" for cooperating with representatives of the Russian security services over the course of multiple years.

- In 2025, David Arutyunyan, a Russian citizen with an Estonian residence permit, was deported from Estonia for systematic propagation of Russian narratives through social media[1].

- In 2024, Viacheslav Morozov, a former professor at the University of Tartu, was sentenced to 6,5 years in prison for collaborating with the Russian security services.

- In 2025, Ivan Dmitriev, an Estonian citizen of Russian descent and an active member of Estonian Defence Leage (Kaitseliit) from the predominantly Russophone city of Narva was sentenced to 4 years and 11 months imprisonment for collecting information at the request of the Russian FSB, including on the political and security situation in Estonia.

Russia also *engages in* "Musical Diplomacy": a musical concert dedicated to the Great Patriotic War is staged annually by Russian authorities in Ivangorod mainly for the residents of the city of Narva on the Estonian bank of the river.[75] It aims to appeal to and attract the attention of Estonian Russophones through patriotic songs and dances. On the Estonian side, a composite portrait of Vladimir Putin and Adolf Hitler was displayed on the wall of the Hermann Castle facing Russia in 2025. A banner calling Putin a "war criminal" has been displayed on the initiative of the Narva Museum on the 9th of May since 2023 as a visual response to the concert in Ivangorod. Maria Smorzhevskikh-Smirnova, director of the Narva Museum, was sentenced in absentia in Russia for the banner on charges of extremism. This case demonstrates that Russia's toolkit includes moral pressure and legal persecution of anti-Putin Russophones as a form of transnational repression.

Along with their negative portrayal of the policies of the Estonian government, pro-Russian voices foster anti-Ukrainian attitudes, including towards Ukrainian war refugees. Public use of the slogan "Glory to Ukraine" was met with criticism in some of Russian language media in Estonia[76] and the police intervened in several cases of fake news disseminated about Ukrainian refugees[77]. The right-wing Estonian National Conservative Party (EKRE) amplified these narratives by accusing the government of Russification of Estonia through hosting Ukrainian war refugees.[78]

Pro-Russian and Russia-loyal narratives can also contribute towards *Indirect political mobilization*. Because of their subversive potential and risk of weaponisation, their circulation is understood as a security problem: qualified as part of "hostile influence operations" and "non-military attacks against society's fundamental values and attitudes"[79]. Through this lens, both Russia-supported and Russia-oriented media content create and exacerbate political conflicts and societal tensions, rather than function as a mere information environment that connects and informs people.

Recruitment of Baltic Russophones

In January 2026 investigative journalists from The Dossier Center released a documentary* describing how Russian secret services recruit Baltic Russophones for collecting information about local Russian speakers and for publicly threatening anti-Putin activists with repercussions for their activities. According to the journalists, the extraditions of Russian diplomats from the Baltic and other European states after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine created a deficit of first-hand information, which the secret services aimed to is compensate through more active clandestine contacts with local informers willing to work for the Russian government.

* The Dossier Center (2026, January 28). Kak FSB gotovitsia k novoi voine.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZfM60AerDs&t=208s

The tactics and techniques Russia employs in Estonia to shape what narratives are salient, and that target Estonia's Russophone population, show how information suppression cannot be fully separated from the broader context of transnational repression and coercion. While this section has placed an emphasis on analysing the narratives that are distributed (and the narratives these are designed to undermine or 'flood'), the case of Estonia illustrates these may involve (implicit) incitement of violent actions. While, in some of the incidents described, direct Russian involvement has been demonstrated, in other cases connections are obscured or activities appear to have had local roots. It is clear, however, that Russia views the Russophone diaspora in Estonia as a potential human asset for achieving its political

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[75] LenTV24 (2025, May 9). Berega Pobedy. Kontsert v Den' 80-letiia Velikoi Pobedy. Ivangorod. Granitsa s Estoniei. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1T5B3lY--hk.

[76] Delfi (2022, March 17). Mnenie: Frazu "Slava Ukraini" ya seichas slyshu chasche chem "Mu kallis isamaa." https://rus.delfi.ee/statja/96183573/mnenie-frazu-slava-ukrayini-ya-seychas-slyshu-chashche-chem-mu-kallis-isamaa?fbclid=IwAR1ZMRwPqPdjA8209eeNpX8DXMvZd7vwyodugBjWXHE8TWJE1u9kVrxABEA.

[77] ERR (2022, March 18). Narodu vazhno: Kak na severo-vostoke otnosiatsa k ukrainskim bezhentsam. https://rus.err.ee/1608537328/narodu-vazhno-kak-na-severo-vostoke-otnosjatsja-k-ukrainskim-bezhencam.

[78] Uued Uudised (2024, April 19). Kurb ja uskumatu: taasiseseisev Eesti jätkab liberaalse valitsuse juhtimisel NLKP venestamiskursil. https://uueduudised.ee/kurb-ja-uskumatu-taasiseseisev-eesti-jatkab-liberaalse-valitsuse-juhtimisel-nlkp-venestamiskursil/.

[79] Estonian Internal Security Service (2025). Annual Review 2023-2024. https://kapo.ee/sites/default/files/content_page_attachments/annual-review-2024-2025.pdf.

objectives, and seeks to influence the public opinion of the Russophone population and instrumentalise ethnic and societal tensions.

3.3 TTPs of information suppression: salience

TACTICS	TECHNIQUES
Preserve a Russian-language "bubble"	Soft power measures cum influence operations
	Pro-active: regular information attacks on Estonia aimed at damaging its international reputation and questioning the validity of Estonia's pro-Ukrainian position
Foster polarization and segregation of Estonian society	Extension of the "Russian world" network to Estonian political elite
	Reactive: sharp criticism of Estonian educational reform, citizenship policy and new security measures undertaken by Estonia after 2022
Maintain a high interest to Russian language information sources	Trans-ideological melange
	Combination of rational and emotional arguments
Silence politically uncomfortable issues	Inciting anti-Ukrainian attitudes
	"Musical diplomacy"
Undermine moral authority of Estonian media	Fostering anti-Estonian political mobilisation
Normalise the war against Ukraine	Support for the founders of the *Koos / Vmeste* party Musical diplomacy
Denial of threats from Russia	Portrayal of Ukraine and Ukrainian war refugees as a threat to Estonia

4. The Diaspora: Perceptions of Information Suppression in Latvia and Estonia

Western democracies typically regard Russia as an authoritarian state that restricts freedom of speech and access to information critical of the Kremlin. ARM findings show that among Baltic Russophones, however, only some interpret Russia's suppression of information as an authoritarian practice that is designed to shape public beliefs and secure loyalty to the regime. Others normalise information suppression in Russia, viewing these measures as efforts to prevent dissent and maintain stability. This latter group often adopts a cynical stance, asserting that absolute freedom of speech and unrestricted access to information do not exist, and contending that the suppression of information is a universal practice serving political elites. Russophones who moved to the Baltics after 1991, especially those who migrated after February 2022, are generally more critical of Russia than those who lived there before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Latvia and Estonia – both EU member states since 2004 – are countries with historically complex relations with Russia, shaped by the annexation of their territories by the Russian Empire in the 18th century and their occupation by the Soviet Union from 1940 until 1991. Both states border Russia and have a large Russian-speaking minority, mainly as a result of migration during the Soviet period, but also post-1991 immigration, including a recent influx of Russian migrants after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Today, 38% of Latvia's 1.9 million population[80] and 29% of Estonia's 1.4 million population speak Russian[81] as their mother tongue. This group is diverse in terms of their geo-political leanings[82] and media preferences.[83] Most are citizens of Latvia and Estonia, yet a significant part holds Russian citizenship or has the status of a non-citizen.

Initially pragmatic in their post-Soviet engagement with Russia, Latvia and Estonia adopted increasingly cautious positions after Putin's rise to power in the 2000s and Russia's assertive foreign policy, underlining Russia's moral obligation to protect the Russian-speaking

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[80] The data refers to people aged 18-69. Official Statistics Portal. (2025). Mother tongue and language used at home by region in 2022 (per cent of the population in the relevant group). https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_OD/OSP_OD__apsekojumi__pieaug_izgl/PIA77.px.

[81] Raadik. H. M. (2022). Population Census. 76% of Estonia's population speak a foreign language. Statistics Estonia. https://rahvaloendus.ee/en/news/population-census-76-estonias-population-speak-foreign-language.

[82] Kaprāns, M., & Mieriņa, I. (2019). Minority reconsidered: Towards a typology of Latvia's Russophone identity. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *71*(1): 24-47.

[83] Vihalemm, T., Juzefovičs J., & Leppik, M. (2019). Identity and media-use strategies of the Estonian and Latvian Russian-speaking populations amid political crisis. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *71*(1), 48-70; Vihalemm, T., & Juzefovičs, J. (2022). Navigating conflicts through the media: The sceptical and self-responsible repertoires of Baltic Russian-speakers. *East European Politics and Societies, 36*(2), 423-445.

population abroad. Since then, Russia has been perceived as the main risk to national security, with threat perceptions increasing after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Since then, both countries have increasingly aligned in their securitisation of Russian-speakers by adopting policies that exclude them from the public sphere.[84] Estonia has, though, maintained a more moderate approach than Latvia regarding its media policy.

Previous audience research on Russian FIMI activities has focused on Russian disinformation, with far less interest in Russian information suppression. As with research into Russian disinformation, a central concern in the study of Russian information suppression has been its effectiveness: e.g. in downplaying activities of the political opposition,[85] intervening in social media communication and suppressing social protest.[86]

Several studies have explored how audiences in Russia and elsewhere have responded to Russian efforts to suppress information: e.g., by accessing information blocked by the government,[87] revealing information the government has attempted to hide[88] and providing oppositional narratives[89] or alternative frames to official rhetoric,[90] or, with the opposite aim, retranslating pro-government narratives,[91] or collaborating with the government in its attempts to suppress information.[92]

Few recent studies have investigated the attitudes and responses of audiences outside of Russia towards the restriction of pro-Kremlin news providers by the EU[93] and Ukrainian

[84] Schulze, J. L., & Pupcenoks, J. (2025). Securitizing Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia: The frame-policy nexus before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Nationalities Papers*, 1-25.

[85] Kazun, A. (2019). To cover or not to cover: Alexei Navalny in Russian media. *International Area Studies Review*, *22*(4), 312-326.

[86] White, S., & McAllister, I. (2013). Did Russia (Nearly) have a Facebook Revolution in 2011? Social Media's Challenge to Authoritarianism. *Politics*, *34*(1), 72-84.

[87] Lokot, T. (2021). Articulating Networked Citizenship on the Russian Internet: A Case for Competing Affordances. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(4).

[88] Karalis, M. (2024). Fake leads, defamation and destabilization: how online disinformation continues to impact Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Intelligence and National Security*, *39*(3), 515-524.

[89] Kazun, A. (2019). To cover or not to cover: Alexei Navalny in Russian media. *International Area Studies Review*, *22*(4), 312-326.

[90] Alyukov, M., Kunilovskaya, M., & Semenov, A. (2023). *Getting Messages Across: War Propaganda in Russian Press and Social Media (July - September 2022). Final Monitoring Report*. Russian Election Monitor. https://www.russian-election-monitor.org/slippery-astroturf-of-the-kremlin-war.html

[91] Hoskins, A., & Shchelin, P. (2018). Information war in the Russian media ecology: the case of the Panama Papers. *Continuum*, *32*(2), 250-266.

[92] Mejias, U. A., & Vokuev, N. E. (2017). Disinformation and the media: the case of Russia and Ukraine. *Media, Culture & Society*, *39*(7), 1027-1042.

[93] Wagnsson, C., Hellman, M., & Hoyle, A. (2024). Securitising information in European borders: how can democracies balance openness with curtailing Russian malign information influence? *European Security*, *34*(1), 127-147.

government[94], underlining the difficulties political actors face between balancing between freedom of speech and ensuring security in democratic settings. Yet we know very little about Western audiences' beliefs and responses towards censorship and other forms of information control in authoritarian regimes. There is a gap in our knowledge and understanding on how Western audiences make sense of Russian information suppression and how these perceptions are shaped by their views on restrictions on information as exercised by the EU and Ukraine. Closing of this gap would help substantially to understand the formation of opinion both regarding Russia and audiences' home countries' policies toward Russia, providing input for better-informed policy measures.

4.1 Method

To fill this void, in July 2025 researchers at Riga Stradins University conducted a series of online focus group discussions (hereafter – FGD) with three different segments of Russian-speaking population in Latvia and Estonia:

1. Those who themselves or their parents lived in Latvia and Estonia before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991

2. Those who have moved to Latvia and Estonia from Russia after 1991, but before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022

3. Those who have moved to Latvia and Estonia from Russia after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

These cohorts mark a distinction between Soviet-era and post-Soviet migration, with the latter further subdivided into those who migrated prior to and after 2022. Members of these three migration cohorts have different migration histories and varying levels of experience with Russian information suppression. Members of the first group are long-term residents of Latvia or Estonia, many of whom were born there, and their perceptions of Russian information suppression are shaped largely by mediated accounts, including personal cross-border connections with Russia, or their own observations during brief visits to the country. In contrast, individuals in the third group are the most recent migrants and possess substantial, up-to-date lived experience in Russia, which they can draw upon to make sense of Russian information suppression. The migration rationale for this group is also most likely politically motivated, which, we expect, provides a different basis for interpreting Russian information suppression. The second group comprises people with varying degrees of direct experience of information

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[94] Golovchenko, Y. (2022). Fighting Propaganda with Censorship: A Study of the Ukrainian Ban on Russian Social Media. *The Journal of Politics*, *84*(2), 639-654.

suppression in Russia, depending on when they left Russia, and with a range of migration motivations, from political to non-political.

In total, 55 Russian-speakers participated in the research. During the FGD, study participants were invited to reflect on the possibilities to express freely their political views, share information on political issues, and obtain such information in Russia as compared to in other countries: their home (host)country Latvia or Estonia, war-torn Ukraine, liberal democracies in Europe and the United States, and authoritarian China.

4.2 Results

While Western democracies generally perceive Russia as an authoritarian state that severely restricts freedom of speech and limits access to information critical of the Kremlin, perceptions among Baltics Russophones are more nuanced. Findings from the FGDs indicate that respondents largely agree that Western European countries and the United States are closest to the ideal of freedom of speech and free access to information. Some note a decline following the Trump administration, while others stress the opposite, noting that in the United States even aggressive and unjustified criticism of politicians is allowed. Russia is viewed as occupying an intermediate position, or leaning closer to China, which is perceived as being at the opposite end of the spectrum.

However, these perceptions vary depending on the country of residence and the year of migration. Russophones who moved from Russia to the Baltics after 1991, and particularly those who migrated after February 2022, tend to be more critical in their assessment of Russia than those who themselves or their parents lived in Latvia and Estonia before 1991, who express similar levels of criticism toward Russia and Ukraine, and – in the case of Latvia's Russophones – often toward Latvia itself.

Overall, restrictions on freedom of expression and sharing of information in Russia are considered more problematic than limitations on access to information (see Figures 1 and 2), primarily because the widespread use of VPNs has normalised circumvention of access barriers. Nevertheless, respondents acknowledge that the recent amendments in Russia's Administrative Code, criminalising the use of VPNs for "accessing restricted information resources or information and telecommunications networks", as well as prohibiting VPN advertising, may undermine this widely used practice.

Perceptions of freedom of speech
(Russophones living in Latvia and Estonia before and after 1991)

Figure 1. Perceived freedom of expressing, sharing information in Russia vs other countries among Baltic Russophones

Perceptions of ability to freely access information
(Russophones living in Latvia and Estonia before and after 1991)
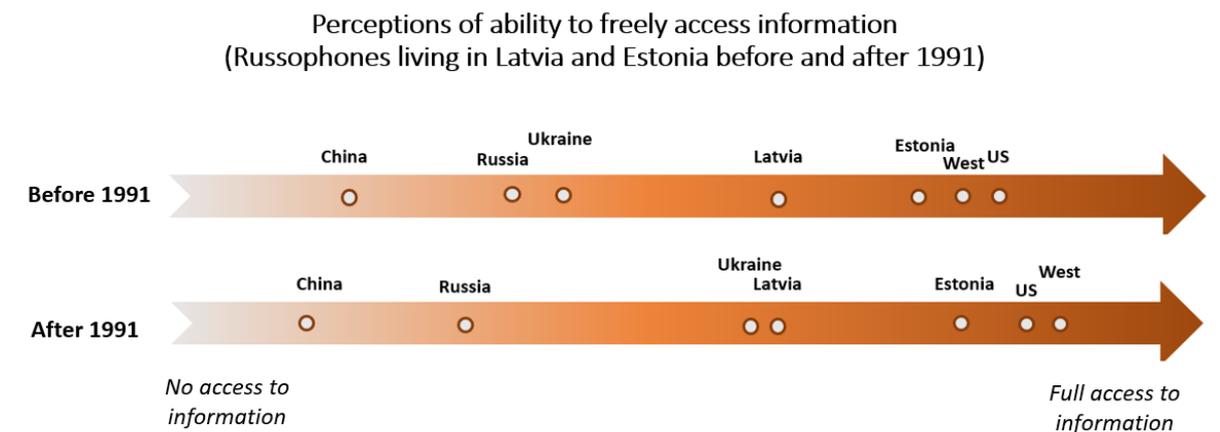

Figure 2. Perceived freedom of obtaining information in Russian vis-a-vis other countries among Baltic Russophones

To make sense of tactics, techniques and procedures of Russian information suppression (see Section 4.3.), Russophones in the Baltics use two overarching frames of interpretation:

- Part of the study participants emphasise that Russia seeks to shape beliefs of Russian public to secure its loyalty to the regime while preserving the image of a peaceful state by concealing its aggression from citizens. These respondents frame Russia's actions as an authoritarian practice that imposes censorship on its population.

In Russia, censorship is systemic and authoritarian, meaning that everything not supporting the official government line is blocked. [..] Many western media outlets are banned or restricted—almost all of them—and major platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube may be under threat or even officially banned. Access to independent Russian media such as Dozhd, Novaya Gazeta, and Radio Liberty—anything that criticizes the authorities—is also blocked. [..] Punishment for holding different opinions is criminal: people are imprisoned simply for not thinking the same way and for not supporting the government's position. The goal of such propaganda is to control how people think and to cultivate loyalty among the population toward the ruling regime.
Male, 41 y/o, Tallinn

- The other part of respondents believe that Russia's primary goal is to prevent internal dissent and resistance to maintain political and social stability. This group tends to normalise Russia's information suppression practices by citing Russia's vast size, which they argue makes centralised control and unified messaging necessary, "difficult times" during the war, and the perceived necessity of preventing chaos. Those who use this frame often report a cynical attitude saying that there is no such thing as freedom of speech or unlimited access to information and that censorship exists in all countries. They argue that all information is filtered and selectively disseminated, often tailored to serve the interests of political elites

In Russia, they have their own order. I like that there's order there, that people live by rules. You don't have that situation where, you know, too much freedom turns into chaos. [..] Personally, I don't support it when the media tries very hard to promote LGBT—almost like advertising it. In Russia, they say, 'No, we don't need to advertise this.' [..] It can provoke others and lead to clashes, conflicts. Why have all that? So, in this regard, I like the stricter system in Russia, because they prevent those situations. [..] I simply support having things a bit stricter so there's some order.
Female, 27 years old, Tallinn

Discussing Russia's information-suppression activities in comparison with restrictions on information exercised by other countries, respondents highlight both similarities and differences in tactics and techniques employed (see Table 1).

- Part of the study participants make a clear line of demarcation between the goals of Russian information suppression and those of other countries. For them, in the case of Latvia, Estonia, and Ukraine, the aim of restrictions is to defend against information warfare from Russia and mitigate national security threats, including concerns over the influence of Russian propaganda on domestic audiences. In this context, bans on pro-

Kremlin media in Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine are justified by parallels to the restrictions on Nazi propaganda during World War II. Even when framed as explanations rather than justifications, such restrictions are often linked to wartime conditions in Ukraine or the historical trauma of Soviet occupation in Latvia and Estonia, as well as their proximity to Russia. In contrast, information suppression in Russia is primarily framed as having internal objectives, including regime loyalty, and maintenance of political and social stability.

- For others, the ultimate goal of restrictions on information in all countries is the same: to maintain power. In all cases, this involves restricting access to alternative information and opposing viewpoints, driven by fear - whether of political and social instability in Russia or of foreign influence and potential internal unrest among Russophone populations in Estonia and Latvia. Respondents in Latvia also note that the Latvian political elite tends to exaggerate the threat posed by Russophones to distract attention from more pressing domestic issues, such as economic problems.

- Finally, there are those who argue that while goals may differ, no goals can justify censorship: it is censorship regardless of intent. They argue that the ideal should be the free flow of information, even if it is harmful or uncomfortable, with alternative measures - such as promoting critical thinking - used instead.

Table 1. Perceived commonalities and particularities of tactics and techniques of Russian information suppression and practices of information restriction by other countries

RUSSIA VS	TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	
Latvia Estonia Ukraine	**Difference**		
	In Russia: To ensure people's loyalty to the regime and to prevent manifestation of dissent and resistance vs. In Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine: To resist Russian information warfare	Restrictions on expression of opposing political views in the public sphere – stricter in Russia Restrictions on accessing opposing political views – stricter in Russia + State propaganda in Russia + Suppression of the political opposition in Russia	Repressions – stricter in Russia
		Restrictions on expression of opposing political views in the public sphere – stricter in Ukraine	Repressions – stricter in Latvia and Ukraine

		Restrictions on accessing opposing political views – stricter in Latvia and Ukraine		
		State surveillance – stricter in Ukraine		
	No difference			
	Overarching goal is the same: to keep in power	Restrictions on accessing opposing political views – the same	Repressions– the same	
China	**Difference**			
		Restrictions on expression of opposing political views in the public sphere and on accessing opposing political views - stricter in China		
		State surveillance – stricter in China		
	No difference			
	Overarching goal is the same: to keep in power	Restrictions on expression of opposing political views in the public sphere and on accessing opposing political views – the same or Russia moving closer to China		

Those who frame Russia's actions as authoritarian often contrast its approach with information restrictions in Ukraine and the Baltic states, emphasising distinctions in both scale and goals. In their view, information suppression in Russia operates on a significantly larger scale: restrictions are far stricter - though not as extreme as during the Stalinist era - and include the banning of a wide range of social and mass media platforms, the near-absence of independent media, and a political environment in which public criticism of the government is largely impossible and, for some, even risky in private conversations. Respondents also stress severe repressions accompanying these restrictions, citing the "foreign agents" law, criminal liability, and imprisonment for violating the information control rules. They note that censorship in Russia is reinforced by pervasive state propaganda and coincides with broader limitations on political freedoms, such as the absence of free and fair elections or prospects for a peaceful transfer of power.

Seen as an authoritarian state, Russia is viewed by some as gradually moving closer to China's model, particularly through new legislation aimed at restricting access to information, including

tighter controls on the use of VPNs. Respondents note that China's highly isolated internet and its ecosystem of domestic social media platforms serve as a template Russia appears eager to emulate through the development of its own internet infrastructure. Likewise, growing digital surveillance, state monitoring of individuals, and the absence of opposition media in China are seen as features toward which Russia is steadily converging.

For others, the level of information suppression in Russia is still less comprehensive than in China, where internet blockings are seen as more extensive, circumvention far more difficult, and state surveillance markedly more totalising. In contrast, Russia's internet is perceived as not yet fully isolated and blockings to be easily bypassed through widely accessible VPNs. Some also note the absence of China's pervasive systems of social control in Russia. Compared with China's far-reaching censorship, where "everything is censored" and citizens may be questioned "on the street", Russian restrictions are seen as less intrusive.

Popular is the view that equates Russia's repressive actions against dissenting voices with those of Ukraine, noting that persecution and imprisonment for opposing the official position occur in both countries, and some respondents even perceive restrictions on freedom of speech and access to information in Russia as less severe than those in Latvia or Ukraine.

Compared with Latvia, Russia is seen as imposing fewer limitations on internet access, whereas in Latvia even routine personal actions are perceived as provoking harsh consequences – such as fines for wearing clothing associated with the Soviet army (e.g. a striped shirt), security police phone calls after online comments, or police visits triggered by neighbours' suspicions of watching Russian television. Respondents also note that Latvian media, including Russian-language outlets, provide only the information that reflect the official position and sometimes withhold information, fostering a sense of censorship.

Restrictions are felt especially by those who do not hold the Latvian citizenship: Russophone residents, particularly recent immigrants, admit practising self-censorship due to fears of losing residence permits, being detained, or facing legal repercussions for discussing Russia's war in Ukraine or Latvia's language and citizenship policy publicly. Blockings of Russian internet sites and television channels in Latvia are seen as harming the technologically less savvy part of the population, especially the elderly, who may not have skills to circumvent restrictions.

In Ukraine, respondents describe an even harsher environment, characterised by what is perceived as "total lawlessness" and severe limits on freedom of speech, including imprisonment for denying Russia's aggression, blocked information sources, weak or jammed internet access, arrests for seeking information contrary to the official position, and citizen surveillance. In this context, Russia is perceived as comparatively less repressive, with restrictions that are narrower in scope and less intensely enforced.

4.3 Perceived TTPs of Russian information suppression in Latvia and Estonia

TACTIC	TECHNIQUE
Influence beliefs of Russian population aimed at ensuring people's loyalty to the regime (subscription of Kremlin's narratives, approval of Russian president Vladimir Putin) and promoting feelings of patriotism; prevent the manifestation of dissent and resistance against the regime of Russian population and preserve political, social stability and order in Russia	State propaganda
	Restricting access to opposing political views and repressing violation of these restrictions, by: • Blocking of internet sources of information: global social media platforms, foreign mass media, independent Russian media, and others (accompanied by restrictions on the use of VPN) • Making public information unavailable (e.g. official statistics, results of public opinion surveys, number of Russian troops killed in the war in Ukraine) • Developing Russia's own internet infrastructure enhancing Russia's power to control and censor information
	Restricting expression of opposing political views in the public sphere and repressing violation of restrictions, by: • Monitoring social media, repressions because of social media posts expressing opposing political views, or their endorsement, sharing • Control over mass media, media censorship and repression of independent mass media and journalists • Developing Russia's own internet infrastructure enhancing Russia's power to control and censor information
	Suppressing political opposition, by: • Repressing political opponents • Election fraud
	State surveillance, including: • Monitoring of private communication • Network of informants • Questioning at the border

5. Conclusion

Identifying a broad variety of techniques targeting the production, dissemination and salience of information, the paper shows how Russia has intensified its information suppression efforts domestically and transnationally. Firstly, these techniques have been employed to silence and limit the reach of independent reporting and research, as well as of voices critical of the Putin regime. As many of these have been forced into exile, and as the Russian regime has become more repressive, transnational information suppression has gained in importance. Within this overarching tactic, controlling information related to Russia's war against Ukraine has become key to government strategy since 2022. This has resulted in a sharp acceleration of information suppression and other forms of repression, including in Europe. Second, Russia aims to undermine EU/NATO cohesion and foster polarisation across Europe. States with large Russophone communities, such as Estonia and Latvia, are important targets where Russia aims to "manage" information salience to its advantage.

Taken together, the working paper highlights the importance of studying information suppression as part of FIMI, but also its complexity. Russia targets information production, dissemination and salience through a wide variety of techniques in parallel, while these techniques often complement or reinforce each other. The domestic and transnational dimensions of information suppression, furthermore, are often entangled. For example, restrictive internet legislation, aiming to curtail the information accessible to citizens within Russia, can also impact independent voices located outside of the country.

The overall impact of techniques targeting information production, such as smear campaigns, strategic lawsuits and media capture, includes a chilling effect on media diversity, reduced investigative output on Russian threats, and heightened vulnerability to information manipulation, as information producers face relocation, financial ruin, or legal battles. The analysis shows how techniques Russia uses to silence its critics at home, such as intimidation and economic coercion, are similarly used to target information production in Europe. The use of strategic lawsuits (SLAPPs), meanwhile, shows how Russia also makes use of the opportunities European countries offer to impede journalists and other critical voices in performing their role and to promote self-censoring.

Russia targets information dissemination infrastructures intensively to silence dissent. By simultaneously throttling YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp – the foreign services that remained accessible after Russia blocked others shortly after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine – and incentivising their domestic alternatives, Russia seeks to move users to an online environment fully under its control. These restrictions also have transnational implications. By blocking nearly all foreign social media platforms and messaging applications, the options available to independent media working from exile to reach audiences in Russia have become slim. Furthermore, legislation used to obstruct or silence journalists, media and (political)

activists, such as designating them "foreign agents" or "undesirable organisations," also works to limit information dissemination by creating risks for others sharing information produced by them.

Finally, the first sentencing, in 2025, for searching for extremist information online signals a worrying shift in internet censorship in Russia. While, previously, restrictive laws targeted the information dissemination services (e.g., social media) to pressure these into cooperation or block them, the use of such services was not illegal. By penalising information search activities, the law thus signals a shift in approach.

The analysis of Russian efforts to "manage" information salience in Estonia underlines the importance of studying this domain as part of transnational information suppression, and the wide variety of information manipulation strategies that Russia employs (e.g., by labelling certain speaking positions as extremist or fascist). Some strategies, such as de-politicising the debate, ostensibly "purifying" it of political content, are not commonly included in disinformation research and warrant further attention. The analysis also illustrates how online and offline spheres of information manipulation cannot be neatly separated and often serve to reinforce each other.

The focus group research, finally, demonstrates how different "generations" of diaspora communities may view information suppression activities differently. Among Baltic Russian-speakers, only some interpret Russia's suppression of information as an authoritarian practice designed to shape public beliefs and secure loyalty to the regime. Others normalise information suppression in Russia, viewing these measures as efforts to prevent dissent and maintain stability, and contending that the suppression of information is a universal practice serving political elites. Russophones who moved to the Baltics after 1991, especially those who relocated post-February 2022, are generally more critical of Russia than those who lived there before the collapse of the Soviet Union. This stresses the need to differentiate within diaspora communities and illustrates how interventions to protect the information environment from foreign interference can be perceived as illegitimate or repressive.