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THESIS

**DISINFORMATION TARGETING DEMOCRACY: VIOLENT
EFFECTS OF RUSSIA'S ACTIVE MEASURES CAMPAIGNS IN
FRANCE, GERMANY, AND THE UNITED STATES**

by

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THE UNITED STATES**

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ABSTRACT

Russia has used active measures—economic, cyber, and disinformation efforts—to target democratic populations and polarize political opinions. This polarization erodes democratic political processes from within, achieving Russia’s goals to make Western democracy appear fragile when contrasted with the strength of Putin’s autocracy. The effects of active measures are difficult to quantify, but analysis of recent events in France, Germany, and the United States suggest that the Kremlin’s efforts have made an impact: some members of extreme movements use violence in support of goals that echo Russian disinformation. It can be demonstrated that Russian active measures targeting far-right extremists, and violent acts committed by some of those extremists—such as the insurrection on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021—can be correlated to the rise in far-right violence in France, Germany, and the United States, but causation cannot be demonstrated at this time.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
A.	MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION.....	1
B.	SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION.....	2
C.	LITERATURE REVIEW	2
D.	POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES	9
E.	RESEARCH DESIGN	11
F.	THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE	11
II.	CASE STUDY I: FRANCE.....	13
A.	BACKGROUND	13
B.	UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT	14
C.	FAR-RIGHT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS	18
D.	ACTIVE MEASURES.....	23
E.	THE RUSSIAN HISTORICAL CONNECTION	27
F.	THE RUSSIAN MEDIA CONNECTION	31
G.	EFFECTS OF ACTIVE MEASURES	33
H.	CONCLUSION	35
III.	CASE STUDY II: GERMANY	39
A.	BACKGROUND	39
B.	UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT	41
C.	FAR-RIGHT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS	43
D.	ACTIVE MEASURES.....	45
E.	THE RUSSIAN HISTORICAL CONNECTION	47
F.	THE RUSSIAN MEDIA CONNECTION	49
G.	EFFECTS OF ACTIVE MEASURES	50
H.	CONCLUSION	53
IV.	THE UNITED STATES	55
A.	BACKGROUND	55
B.	UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT	56
C.	FAR-RIGHT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS	58
D.	ACTIVE MEASURES.....	61
E.	THE RUSSIAN CULTURAL CONNECTION.....	65

F.	THE RUSSIAN MEDIA CONNECTION	66
G.	EFFECTS OF ACTIVE MEASURES	70
H.	CONCLUSION	71
V.	IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	73
A.	CONFLICT IN UKRAINE	73
B.	DISCUSSION	76
C.	POLICY EVALUATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	77
D.	FOR FURTHER STUDY	79
	LIST OF REFERENCES.....	81
	INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	95

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADL	Antidefamation League
AfD	Alternativ für Deutschland (English: Alternative for Germany)
ANTIFA	Antifascists
APT	Advanced Persistent Threat
BBC	British Broadcasting Network
BKA	Bundeskriminalamt (English: Federal Criminal Police Office)
BfV	Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, Bundesverfassungsschutz (English: Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution)
CSIS	Center for Strategic & International Studies
CNCCEP	Commission National de Contrôle de la Campagne Électorale en vue de l'élection Présidentielle (English: National Commission of the Control of the Electoral Campaign for the Presidential Election)
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
DFRLab	The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Labs
DNC	Democratic National Convention
DW	DeutscheWelle
EU	European Union
GEC	Global Engagement Center
GI	Génération Identitaire (English: Generation Identity)
GUD	Groupe Union Défense
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
IRA	Internet Research Agency
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (English: Committee for State Security)
MAGA	Make America Great Again
NATO	North American Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPR	National Public Radio
RT	Russia Today
UMP	Union pour un mouvement Populaire (English: Union for a Popular Movement)

US	United States
VPN	Virtual Private Network
WNCM	World National Conservative Movement
WWG1WGA	Where We Go One, We Go All

I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

I intend to study if Russia uses disinformation in active measure campaigns to create violent effects in Western democracies. Democracy has posed a threat to Russian authoritarianism since the mid-twentieth century, and both the West and Russia have been at physical and psychological odds ever since.¹ Though evidence of psychological and political meddling has been brought to light in recent decades, efforts to thwart democracies began long ago. “Active measures” were optimized during the Cold War with the end game of polarizing social cohesion, undermining public confidence, sowing confusion, and gaining strategic influence.² Advances in technology have enabled a rapid spread to foreign audiences. Active measures intend to prey on complex cultural fissures in democratic societies and are designed to encourage citizens to criticize democratic leaders and the validity of the system itself, causing erosion from within. Three prime examples of democratic states, France, Germany, and the United States, are currently experiencing the effects of active measures campaigns spreading disinformation through right-wing movements.³ Far-right ideals are increasingly represented in political rhetoric through the National Rally Party in France, the Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, and recent trends in a faction of the Republican Party under Donald Trump in the United States.⁴ Leaders and well-known supporters of each movement also show some level of deference, if not outright support, for Vladimir Putin and his autocratic reign in

¹ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: Russia” (Freedom House, January 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2021>.

² Marek Posard et al., *From Consensus to Conflict: Understanding Foreign Measures Targeting U.S. Elections* (RAND Corporation, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR704-1>.

³ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: France” (Freedom House, January 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/france/freedom-world/2021>; Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2022, The United States” (Freedom House, January 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2022>; Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: Germany” (Freedom House, January 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/germany/freedom-world/2021>.

⁴ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “Democracy Under Siege” (Freedom House, January 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>. 10.

Russia.⁵ Considering Russia's refined ability to spread believable disinformation through active measures campaigns and the desire to prove democracy's inferiority, is it possible that Russia has focused its active measures to inspire right-wing extremist movements in France, the United States, and Germany? If so, have these campaigns intentionally shifted action from digital to kinetic in the form of domestic terrorism?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Recent events around the globe and analysis from scholars demonstrate a recession in democratization.⁶ For example, the insurgency on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, put American distrust in the democratic system on display and encouraged global distrust in democracy as a representation of the will of the people. These ends are directly aligned with Vladimir Putin's primary goal of protecting the power he has established in Russia. Mr. Putin has an array of options to achieve this as a leader of a great global power, ranging from hard power through military warfare to soft power through cultural and psychological warfare. Russia is unable to militarily challenge any sovereign democracy worldwide without risking the others coming to its defense. A far more effective strategic method of using active measures to generate violence within and amongst citizens of democratic nations would rid Russia of any direct culpability and cause more damage than Russian military could inflict alone.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Russia's history of conducting active measures campaigns has been well documented in news reports, scholarly articles, and non-fiction books. Posard et.al define active measures as "covert and overt information efforts organized by a government to

⁵ Gabriel Gatehouse, "Marine Le Pen: Who's Funding France's Far Right?," *BBC News*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39478066>; Gabriel Gatehouse, "German Far-Right MP 'Could Be Absolutely Controlled by Russia,'" *BBC News*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47822835>; James Kirchick, "How the GOP Became the Party of Putin," July 18, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/18/how-the-gop-became-the-party-of-putin-215387/>.

⁶ Zselyke Csaky, "Nations in Transit 2021: The Antidemocratic Turn" (Freedom House, January 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2021/antidemocratic-turn>; Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 5–17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0049>; Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Signs of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 5–15, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0000>.

affect a target's domestic and foreign politics and are used as an instrument of power.”⁷ The extent of the effects are the subject of governmental investigations, academic study, and public speculation. The variety of perspectives are likewise reflected in governmental reports, academic journals, think tank analyses, and even leisure reading materials. There is a substantial amount of literature dedicated to laying the framework for active measures, in understanding the “gray zone” as the battle space of choice, how disinformation is the most useful tool in that space, and the importance of allowing measures to run their course to allow for maximum effect.

Overt and covert operations around the world have been heavily influenced by ancient war theorists, such as Sun Tzu.⁸ In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu states that “All warfare is based on deception.”⁹ This sage guidance has heavily influenced clandestine warfare, including, but not limited to, influence operations employed by the Soviet state going back as far as the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.¹⁰ After Nicholas II's abdication of the throne, ending Russia's line of tsarist empires, Vladimir Lenin took advantage of an opportunity to seize control from the provisional Duma government by perpetuating a narrative that the proletariat can have influence over their government and paved the way for Bolshevik power consolidation.¹¹ This experience underscored the importance of controlling state ideology, which has shaped Soviet and Russian domestic and foreign policy as the “exemplar communist state...maintained for the people of the world” since the early 20th century.¹² Marxist-Leninist ideology provided an initial patience in “playing the long game” for eventual total revolution and became an integral part of Russian policy, continuing to modern Russia.¹³

⁷ Posard et al., *From Consensus to Conflict*. 4.

⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁹ Sun Tzu. 66.

¹⁰ David V. Gioe, Richard Lovering, and Tyler Pachesny, “The Soviet Legacy of Russian Active Measures: New Vodka from Old Stills?,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 33, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 514–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1725364>. 522.

¹¹ Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny. 522–523.

¹² Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny. 523.

¹³ Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny. 523.

Tzu further encourages leaders not to ruin states prior to taking them, and to make every attempt to win war without ever fighting a battle.¹⁴ Echoes of this strategy are seen in Soviet disinformation campaigns in the Cold War is evident in Soviet Committee on State Security (KGB) Officer training materials which explicitly define active measures.¹⁵ Gioe et al. detail that during this time period, the “heart and soul of Soviet Intelligence,” the KGB, was employed to use strategic influence to shape the battlefield in the Soviet Union’s favor, often targeting the Soviet near abroad and considering any influence made in the West as collateral damage.¹⁶ Russian active measures campaigns had a brief reprieve under Mikhail Gorbachev in the name of glasnost and improving relations with the West.¹⁷ However, Vladimir Putin’s rise to power revitalized efforts to control strategic narratives without the promise of instating communism worldwide.¹⁸ As a former KGB officer, Putin has significant understanding of the effects of manipulated information.¹⁹

Posard et al. also state that Russia manipulates information using a variety of active measures “tailored to the issue, environment, target, and intended result.”²⁰ The spectrum of measures available range from taking advantage of existing conspiracy theories, groups, and controversial or emotional narratives, paying for the support of disinformation and fringe movements, to hacking operations to acquire information illegally with the intent to divulge. Used correctly, these campaigns lay the foundation for the exploitation of a foreign population against their own government with the hopes of making another system appear more favorable. Though I will focus on Russia’s use of active measures, they are known to

¹⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. 77.

¹⁵ Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny, “The Soviet Legacy of Russian Active Measures.” 516.

¹⁶ CNN, “Inside the KGB: An Interview with Retired KGB Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin,” *CNN*, January 1998, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070206020316/http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/21/interviews/kalugin/>; Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny, “The Soviet Legacy of Russian Active Measures.” 516, 526.

¹⁷ Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny, “The Soviet Legacy of Russian Active Measures.” 531–532.

¹⁸ Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny. 532.

¹⁹ Gioe, Lovering, and Pachesny. 533.

²⁰ Posard et al., *From Consensus to Conflict*. 7.

be used by other nations, such as China, and the United States, according to Morris et al.²¹ However, Moscow has been the most effective at institutionalizing and converting them into a “comprehensive foreign policy tool” to undermine Western democracy, especially in the United States as stated by Posard et al., and promote Russian power.²² In his book, Thomas Rid details early forms of active measures campaigns which were visible in the 1920s but became more urgent in the Cold War Era due to the extreme ideological differences between the West (western Europe and the United States) and the Soviet Union.²³ Methods have become more sophisticated as technology has advanced, allowing for Russia to use asymmetrical methods in non-conventional battle spaces. Journalism from Radio Free Europe states that this has been a key for operational success with Russia’s status as a declining but disruptive world power.²⁴

The American National Intelligence Council states that despite maintaining advantages such as “a sizeable conventional military, weapons of mass destruction, energy and mineral resources, an expansive geography, and a willingness to use force overseas,” Moscow continues its relative decline in material capabilities.²⁵ The nature of its international position has made the gray zone, defined by Morris et al. as the battle space between peace and war, Russia’s most viable battle space.²⁶ They argue that there are four defining features of a gray zone. First, it remains “below the threshold that would justify a military response;” second, it “unfolds gradually over time;” third, there is a “lack of attributability;” and for overt actions, the fourth feature is “extensive legal and political

²¹ Lyle J. Morris et al., “Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone” (Santa Monica: Rand, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html. xi.

²² Posard et al., *From Consensus to Conflict*. 4.

²³ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

²⁴ RFE/RL, “U.S. Intel Report Predicts Russia Will Be A Declining But ‘Disruptive Power’ Over Next Two Decades,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-intel-russia-declining-disruptive-power-/31194504.html>.

²⁵ Director of National Intelligence, “Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World” (Washington, D.C.: Director of National Intelligence, March 2021), <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home>.

²⁶ Lyle J. Morris et al., “Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone.” 8.

justifications, often grounded in historical claims supported with documentation.”²⁷ Furthermore, Morris et al. detail three levels of gray zone activities: aggressive, persistent, and moderate, each warranting a different level of response below the level of armed conflict.²⁸ Russia is able to leverage its willingness to use asymmetric force overseas in a method and timeline of its choosing to affect foreign politics in rival nations with plausible deniability or justification in an attempt to bring itself back up to consideration as a world power. Russia has become adept at navigating the gray zone and has supported a wide range of severe campaigns in just the past few years. A few examples of severe active measures campaigns in the gray zone include the interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, the June 2021 hacking and subsequent takedown of Colonial Pipeline, and the flood of disinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, including mitigation strategies and vaccinations.

The gray zone tool that I will focus on is Russia’s use of disinformation. Nemr and Gangwire define it as “the purposeful dissemination of false information intended to mislead or harm” and is commonly directed at an opposing nation’s population.²⁹ While it is not the only facet of active measures Russia has used against democracies, it is consistently used, arguably the easiest to employ, and has the least potential for major repercussions. The spread of disinformation has been facilitated by the popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and lack of regulation on what can and cannot be said or repeated on these sites, according to Helmus et al.³⁰ Helmus et al. continue that Moscow capitalizes on political divisions and spreads emotionally triggering propaganda intended to divert a foreign population’s support from its democratic government.³¹ A favored Russian method is the use of the “meme,” defined by Helmus et

²⁷ Lyle J. Morris et al. 8–10.

²⁸ Lyle J. Morris et al. xvi.

²⁹ Christina Nemr and William Gangwire, “Weapons of Mass Distraction” (United States Department of State, March 2019), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Weapons-of-Mass-Distraction-Foreign-State-Sponsored-Disinformation-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>. 4.

³⁰ Todd C. Helmus et al., “Russian Propaganda Hits Its Mark” (Santa Monica: RAND, 2020), www.rand.org/t/RRA704-3. 1.

³¹ Helmus et al. 1.

al. as “any fad, joke, or memorable piece of content that spreads virally across the web, usually in the form of short videos or photography accompanied by a clever caption.”³² Memes distill concepts, feelings, and ideas into an easily shareable piece of media that ideologically aligns with the targeted partisan citizen and is designed to further entrench the target into partisan views. Studies by Morris et al. have found that content originating in Russia “generates stronger emotional responses with a starker partisan divide than real news of false news content does.”³³ According to Helmus et al., the evocation of emotional responses leads users to “like” and “share” content, and users may or may not know of its malintent.³⁴ When users spread a piece of disinformation (designed to intentionally spread misleading information) it is then distinguished as misinformation, which is the unintentional spread of misleading information. Users may have the best of intentions when unknowingly spreading a piece of Russian propaganda as misinformation. However, having good intentions does not mean that the action becomes harmless. In fact, the spread of disinformation in any capacity can have devastating consequences felt by society as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies the perfect scenario for Russia to spread disinformation, working in the gray zone to undermine faith in global and domestic institutions by discrediting efforts to contain outbreaks and highlighting governmental failures, according to Smith et al.³⁵ In their report published by Graphika, Smith et al. display how the global pandemic hit the world like a wrecking ball, forcing governments to make harsh decisions quickly, and claim that COVID-19’s conflicting origin story, disputed mitigation techniques, and debates on the trustworthiness of government guidance provide no shortage of disinformation.³⁶ Milewski argues that the pandemic has “increased the spread of aggressive information campaigns...linked to intentional and coordinated

³² Helmus et al. 3.

³³ Helmus et al. 51.

³⁴ Helmus et al. 52.

³⁵ Melanie Smith, Erin McAweeney, and Léa Ronzaud, “The COVID-19 ‘Infodemic’” (Graphika, April 2020), <https://graphika.com/reports/the-covid-19-infodemic/>. 6.

³⁶ Smith, McAweeney, and Ronzaud. 8.

activities carried out by state or state-sponsored actors... to strengthen the international position of certain entities.”³⁷

What could have been a public health crisis driven by medical experts and scientists has been politicized into a conversation about personal rights and governmental responsibility and overreaches. The global dialogue around the pandemic has become more complex and less cohesive as it has progressed, and Smith et al. state that skepticism grows as the information environment changes as scientists learn more about the virus.³⁸ Smith’s report shows that much of the disinformation has been propagated by right-wing accounts across the world, most notably in the United States, Italy, and France.³⁹ Smith et al. believe that these narratives have been used to promulgate racist and anti-immigrant views through clickbait headlines and conspiratorial narratives.⁴⁰ Pointing the finger at global elite, such as Bill Gates and George Soros, as puppet masters in the “new world order” attempting to control the global population, has led to increased anti-establishment, conspiratorial narratives.⁴¹ Following distrust of authorities, conversations urging individuals to “do your own research,” and use home remedies or other drugs not approved for coronavirus treatment have been pushed by influential leaders and amongst likeminded factions of developed societies.⁴² Extremist political factions in democratic countries are already skeptical of governmental legitimacy, especially if the incumbent is on the opposite side of the political spectrum. Information which confirms suspicions, especially where health and wellness is concerned, can be a source of fear. This can lead large numbers of individuals to react in ways detrimental to society, such as not following mitigation techniques (social distance requirements, mask wearing) and choosing not to vaccinate when available and eligible. As of September 2021 in the United States, according to The New York Times,

³⁷ Damian Milewski, “The Analysis of Narratives and Disinformation in the Global Information Environment Amid Covid-19 Pandemic,” *EUROPEAN RESEARCH STUDIES JOURNAL* XXIII, no. Special Issue 3 (November 1, 2020): 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.35808/ersj/1848>. 3.

³⁸ Smith, McAweeney, and Ronzaud, “The COVID-19 ‘Infodemic.’” 5.

³⁹ Smith, McAweeney, and Ronzaud. 5.

⁴⁰ Smith, McAweeney, and Ronzaud. 5.

⁴¹ Smith, McAweeney, and Ronzaud. 6.

⁴² Smith, McAweeney, and Ronzaud. 6.

53% of the population is fully vaccinated (two doses received), and 62% are semi-vaccinated (one dose received).⁴³ This is despite vaccine availability for high-risk populations dating to early January 2021, for all other adults beginning in March 2021, and finally approved for adolescents 12 and over in May 2021, as reported by AJMC.⁴⁴ In a New York Times article, Julian E. Barnes postulates that it is difficult to quantify the amount of Russian disinformation that has contributed to the lack of support for scientifically-backed prevention methods in the United States,⁴⁵ but the end goals of division through politicization of a divisive issue rooted in distrust are in line with Russia's end goal and have likely had a significant contribution to the hundreds of thousands of COVID-19 related deaths in the United States, as reported by the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁴⁶

The controversy and disinformation surrounding COVID-19 is a single modern example of lethal affects resulting from Russian active measures campaigns. Russia has been able to exploit distrust in domestic and international establishments by creating and spreading information via social and traditional media emotionally resonates with an already dissatisfied population. To top it off, none of these efforts can be directly attributed to Russia in any way that warrants reaction, because they have caused psychological change from a grassroots level. Gaining trust and changing public perception is a much more important and difficult task than punishing Russia, and so the cycle continues.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

I hypothesize that the deterioration of stable democracies in France, Germany, and the United States is a result of the sharpening of disinformation campaign efforts seen in

⁴³ The New York Times, "Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>.

⁴⁴ AJMC Staff, "A Timeline of COVID-19 Vaccine Developments in 2021," June 3, 2021, <https://www.ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid-19-vaccine-developments-in-2021>.

⁴⁵ Julian E. Barnes, "Russian Disinformation Targets Vaccines and the Biden Administration," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/05/us/politics/covid-vaccines-russian-disinformation.html>.

⁴⁶ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "COVID Data Tracker" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, May 26, 2022), <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>.

the Cold War era through active measures. The constant threat of nuclear war and communist authoritarian takeovers across physical borders persisted through Europe and the United States, but this was only superficial conflict. Arguably, the actual battleground was social and went far deeper, planting seeds of doubt into the hearts and minds of citizens in Western democracies by preying on societal dysfunction caused by cultural change.

In the early days of subversive warfare through active measures, disinformation could be identified through subtle irregularities – for example, the use of British colloquialisms in documents claimed to be American that were eventually discovered to be Russian forgeries.⁴⁷ As technology advanced through print media, radio, and eventually the internet, the world was brought closer together through ease of access to information and an equal ease of publishing from anywhere to anyone. Lack of cross-checking and a desire to believe information presented, especially when commiserating over similar societal concerns, has fueled Russia's ability to re-engage in successful active measures campaigns. The intent of active measures is to cause mental and emotional discontent amongst the citizens of a democracy with the goal to outvote democratic leadership. Widespread internet access has provided a medium for distribution and public sharing platforms have provided the tools for disinformation to spread like quickly and effectively to users hungry for information.

I hypothesize that Russia's current active measures campaigns have been so successful in causing mental and emotional distress among democratic populations that they are leading to domestic violence. France, Germany, and the United States are free, democratic nations which rely on the results of free elections to determine the nations' paths forward. Each nation shares values which include freedom of speech and expression as a person's inalienable rights and highly scrutinized cornerstones of democracy itself. These rights are a population's way of signaling domestic sentiment towards government action or policy outside of voting in free and fair elections. The recent rise of extremist political and media representation in France, Germany and the United States has fanned flames of fear, causing panicked reactions from the streets and screens to the halls of

⁴⁷ Rid, *Active Measures*.

government buildings, resulting in distrust between citizens and their democratically elected officials which has led to violence.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

I will use comparative case studies of effects of Russian active measures in France, Germany, and the United States. I selected these countries because they are prominent democracies whose steadfast adherence to individual freedom pose a significant threat to Russian authoritarianism. I will research Russian disinformation campaigns through active measures in each nation, connections with and support of far-right movements, and how they have managed any effects.

I will consult peer-reviewed literature, unclassified government materials and statistics to correlate active measures influence on far-right violent action. News articles from reputable sources provide factual details on individual events, political or otherwise. Scholarly journals provide analytical insight on longer-term trends and apply, or revise, known theories to account for changes. Unclassified government materials, such as transcripts from legal proceedings and investigative reports, describe in detail the effects that active measures have had on political processes. Statistics from both government and non-government sources quantify effects of both active measures campaigns and violent attacks. Sources such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) hosted by the University of Maryland use open-source data to track terrorist attacks world-wide dating back to the 1970s.

I will compare any identified effects of Russian active measures campaigns in each nation and how they may be linked with violent action on behalf of far-right groups.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE

I will use the body of my thesis to define the far-right movements, Russian active measures campaigns, and effects of those campaigns in three democratic nations: France, Germany, and the United States. I will analyze my findings and compare results from Russian active measures campaigns to determine if they have influenced domestic violence in each nation, and if so, the extent of that influence, or present counter-arguments.

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II. CASE STUDY I: FRANCE

A. BACKGROUND

France has a semi-Presidential system guided by the Constitution of the Fifth Republic enacted on October 4, 1958.⁴⁸ This constitution is based in the Rights of Man and Declaration of 1789, which guarantee a number of protections for French people. Its primary article states that “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organized on a decentralized basis. Statutes shall promote equal access by women and men to elective offices and posts as well as to professional and social positions.”⁴⁹ Despite this declaration in their foundational documents, there has been a surge of representation on both extremes of the political spectrum, reacting strongly to cleavages in French society. Far-right political movements, like many of their kind across the world, have focused on immigration and domestic security after decades of terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists both foreign and home-grown.

Islamic extremism has caused a level of fear and distrust across the French population resulting in laws which focus on heightened surveillance of the French-Muslim population, which can be perceived as a sort of retaliation based on religious preference.⁵⁰ One such law enacted following Samuel Paty’s murder was the Reinforcing Republican Principles Law.⁵¹ The law claims to “combat religious separatism,” but would have several significant ramifications for the French-Muslim community by increasing surveillance on mosques and Muslim associations and require Muslim organizations to “sign a contract of

⁴⁸ French Foreign Ministry, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” (Republic of France Foreign Ministry, 2022), <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/how-government-works>.

⁴⁹ French Republic, “Constitution,” June 3, 1958, https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank_mm/anglais/constitution_anglais.pdf.

⁵⁰ Freedom House, “Freedom House Index 2021.”

⁵¹ Freedom House.

respect for Republican values when applying for state subsidies.”⁵² It can be argued that laws are simply responding to the evolving nature of the threat however, it raises the question of whether or not legislation should be altered in response to every attack, especially with regard to religious ideology as extreme as it may be.⁵³ Article I clearly states a guarantee of secularism in France, and laws such as the Reinforcing Republican Principles law proposed and promoted by the growing far-right political movements such as the National Rally are a direct response to perceived threats based primarily on race and religion. This has taken the form of proposals for and implementation of laws which in black and white appear to support cornerstone French values, but in practice, have led to further division and contention in an otherwise democratically stable nation. Far-right and nationalist ideologies have permeated public discourse, continuing to exclude marginalized groups (including but not limited to ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+) from political participation – though there are no laws outright excluding them.⁵⁴ In fact, France has a history of charging and in some cases convicting politicians and public figures of hate speech if it is deemed to inspire division. Marine Le Pen, the current leader of the mainstream far-right party National Rally, has been charged with hate speech, and some of her party colleagues have been found guilty of the same charge.

B. UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT

The Front national pour l’unité française, or (National Front for French Unity, later to be rebranded as the National Rally in 2018), united several far-right parties in 1972.⁵⁵ It has grown to become “Moscow’s most vocal supporter, where almost no dissenting anti-Russian voices are heard” and until the emergence of the German *Alternativ für*

⁵² Freedom House.

⁵³ Aude Mazoue, “How the November 2015 Attacks Marked a Turning Point in French Terror Laws,” *France 24*, September 5, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210905-how-the-november-2015-attacks-marked-a-turning-point-in-french-terror-laws>.

⁵⁴ Freedom House, “Freedom House Index 2021.”

⁵⁵ “Factsheet: National Rally (Rassemblement National, Previously Front National Or National Front),” Bridge Initiative Team, February 24, 2020. <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-national-rally/>

Deutschland (AfD) was the only major far right party in a top European nation which openly held Eurosceptic and pro-Russian positions.⁵⁶

Marine Le Pen has led the party to increased electoral success domestically and internationally. In 2014, National Front members won two seats in the National Assembly, the first in the party's history.⁵⁷ In 2015, she banished her father from the party in an effort to publicly separate the movement from his controversial views, specifically after he stated that "the Nazi gas chambers were a mere 'detail' of history."⁵⁸ In the same year, she faced her own legal troubles as anti-racism and human rights groups brought a case against her for remarks made in 2010, claiming that she was guilty of "incitement to discrimination, violence, or hatred towards a group of people on the basis of their religion," a charge for which she was found not guilty.⁵⁹ Despite the very public family feud, she did not separate herself significantly ideologically, and maintains Islamophobic and anti-Semitic positions in a more polished way, declaring in 2015 that Islamic fundamentalists were "the only real enemy".⁶⁰ She made this statement during France's regional elections in November, which opened just a week after the coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris. In the first round of elections in December 2015, she campaigned on issues of "immigration, law and order, and anti-terrorism, with a focus on Islam and Muslims."⁶¹ In 2016 and 2017, she proposed initiatives to ban "conspicuous religious symbols" in public spaces, including Islamic

⁵⁶ Polyakova et al., *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*. 7.

⁵⁷ France 24. "French Far-Right National Front Wins First Ever Seats in Senate." September 29, 2014. <https://www.france24.com/en/20140929-french-far-right-national-front-takes-first-ever-seats-senate>

⁵⁸ Bridge Initiative Team, "Factsheet: National Rally (Rassemblement National, Previously Front National Or National Front)" <https://www.france24.com/en/20180209-french-court-upholds-expulsion-national-front-jean-marie-le-pen-anti-semitic>

⁵⁹ Chrisafis, Angelique. "Marine Le Pen Goes on Trial Charged with Anti-Muslim Hate Speech." *The Guardian*. October 20, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/20/marine-le-pen-trial-charged-anti-muslims-hate-speech>

⁶⁰ Bridge Initiative Team, "Factsheet: National Rally (Rassemblement National, Previously Front National Or National Front)"

⁶¹ Benjamin Dodman, "'Victory' in Defeat? Le Pen Raises the Far Right's Glass Ceiling, Fails to Crack It," *France 24*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220425-victory-in-defeat-le-pen-raises-far-right-s-glass-ceiling-fails-to-crack-it>.

hijabs and Jewish kippahs.⁶² In 2018, she rebranded the National Front as Rassemblement National (in English, the National Rally) to attract a wider spread of voters.⁶³ This appeared to have a positive effect, as the party received just over 23% of the vote and 22 seats in the European Parliamentary elections.⁶⁴ Within this body, the National Rally is the leader of the Identity and Democracy Party, a subgroup comprised of other European far-right parties, whose consensus platform rests on the “return [of] power to European member states, curb immigration, and prevent the spread of Islam in Europe.”⁶⁵

Les Identitaires (the Identitarians in English), based in Nice, is the largest fringe of the French far-right movement, and has the explicit goal of defending “the French identity from what it considered harmful foreign influences.”⁶⁶ It was christened as Bloc Identitaire in 2003 and registered in 2009 as a political party under the leadership of Fabrice Robert and Philippe Vardon.⁶⁷ Vardon, who is currently an elected official representing the National Rally party, was fined and imprisoned in 2007 for “incitement to discrimination” for distributing pamphlets proclaiming Islamic immigrants as rapists, and in 2014 was sentenced to six months in prison for a street altercation with three Maghrebien men.⁶⁸ Bloc Identitaire eventually spawned its youth wing, Génération Identitaire (Generation Identity, or GI), which spread to other nations before eventually being disbanded in French law in 2021. Despite its legal disintegration, many of its members continue to promote the Identitarian narrative within France and across Europe.

⁶² Bridge Initiative Team, “Factsheet: National Rally (Rassemblement National, Previously Front National or National Front)” (Bridge, Georgetown University, February 20, 2020), <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-national-rally/>.

⁶³ Bridge Initiative Team.

⁶⁴ Bridge Initiative Team.

⁶⁵ Bridge Initiative Team.

⁶⁶ Counter Extremism Project, “Les Identitaires” (Counter Extremism Project, May 2022), <https://www.counterextremism.com/supremacy/les-identitaires>.

⁶⁷ Jean-Yves Camus, “Génération Identitaire Ban Could Rally Supporters of the Radical Right in France,” *Open Democracy*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ration-identitaire-ban-could-rally-supporters-of-the-radical-right-in-france/>.

⁶⁸ Camus.

The Identitarian crisis narrative of a pure European culture is magnified by France's self-perception as a unique culture. This narrative identifies who is included in the "in" group and expresses grievances concerning those in the "out" group, and can inspire followers to violent action by "implying that all crises experienced by the in-group can only be solved 'through hostile action against the out-group.'" ⁶⁹ In this case, white French natives are threatened by non-white "immigrants" (those of immigrant descent, despite birth country, are often included in this group) and the only solution is physical retaliation. Extremist expert J.M. Berger describes five predominant narratives used to support this notion: "conspiracy, dystopia, impurity, existential threat and apocalypse." ⁷⁰ The first four attributes are highly featured in Identitarian ideology: Muslims are arriving in large numbers, overwhelming the system built for and by the French people, diluting the culture and society by bringing in their own. Most worryingly, the government is encouraging this behavior by sponsoring initiatives which support migrants, whose population will eventually outnumber the white Europeans who created the system now enjoyed, in degraded form, by those who do not deserve it. This fuels the fire with a sense of urgency, inspiring those most fearful into action. ⁷¹ This is further accelerated by connectivity over the internet with social media campaigns providing the medium to spread propaganda. ⁷² Marion Marechal, of the French far-right movement as the granddaughter of National Rally founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, publicly sympathized with the sentiments evoked by the theory with a 2016 tweet that stated: "#GreatReplacement: it's a truth in a number of territories in France." ⁷³

Identitarians, especially those who belonged to the now defunct GI, are apt social media users who promulgate these messages in a range of formats: "on 'dark social'

⁶⁹ Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, "'The Great Replacement': The Violence Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism" (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf>. 10.

⁷⁰ Davey and Ebner. 10.

⁷¹ Davey and Ebner. 10.

⁷² Davey and Ebner. 15.

⁷³ Davey and Ebner. 15.

platforms... by using memes...disseminating messaging over mainstream social platforms... using alternative media... using offline events, rallies, and stunts.”⁷⁴ The rapid spread of hateful messages in a variety of ways facilitates the spread of the ideology in a much more much more potent way and encourage the movement’s evolution, though some platforms have banned it (Facebook did so in 2018).⁷⁵ Social media is also a preferred medium for Russian active measures campaigns for the same reasons, though there is no evidence that Identitarian communities have been manipulated by these campaigns in the same way that other far-right movements have been.

C. FAR-RIGHT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS

Acts of terrorism by Islamic extremists have ebbed and flowed since the 1980s and have boosted support for the far-right’s strong opposition to non-white immigration into France.⁷⁶ The French population’s historical positions as both the aggressor and the victim of political action may help to contextualize a French Ministry of the Interior statistic which shows a 47% increase in threats made against elected officials from 2020 to the first eleven months of 2021.⁷⁷ The escalation of hostile behavior is supported by a Jean-Jaures Foundation poll which states that one in ten people in France believe that “violent behavior towards lawmakers and their staff, at their offices or homes” was acceptable.⁷⁸ There have been fewer documented cases of violence against these figures than other democracies, as I will describe in the Germany and United States chapters however, the sentiment is telling of a larger which has been affecting modern French society as dissatisfaction has grown.

Members of the GI have taken part in several operations in cooperation with the Defend Europe movement, a pan-European Identitarian group based the notion that

⁷⁴ Davey and Ebner. 23.

⁷⁵ Counter Extremism Project, “Les Identitaires.”

⁷⁶ Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan, “The French Experience of Counter-Terrorism,” *Survival* 45, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 67–98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/survival/45.1.67>. 69.

⁷⁷ France 24, “French Politicians Worry about Surge in Pre-Election Violence,” *France 24*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220121-french-politicians-worry-about-surge-in-pre-election-violence>.

⁷⁸ France 24.

migrants (especially Muslims) dilute the purity and sanctity of the European identity. Defend Europe has undertaken several operations designed to interfere with non-governmental organization (NGO) and private rescue teams conducting humanitarian search and rescue missions of immigrants in the Mediterranean.⁷⁹ In March of 2016, GI members blocked bridge connections between the coastal city of Calais to refugee camps – colloquially known as The Jungle – by burning tires and resisting police attempting to intervene.⁸⁰ Between 80 and 130 GI adherents participated, claiming that Calais was a martyr in the defense of “a migrant invasion” for which the only solution was “‘relocation’ of migrants... back to their country of origin.”⁸¹ In 2018, approximately 100 GI members dressed as government functionaries and blocked Col de l’Echelle (a pass in the Alps on the border of France and Italy and frequently used immigration route) with plastic wire mesh to symbolize the risk of immigration into France.⁸² The then-President of the GI, Clement Gandelin, his spokesman Romain Espino and member Damien Lefevre were arrested and charged with “exercising activities in conditions that could create confusion with a public function,” later fining the group €75,000 (USD\$83,000), sentencing them to six months in prison, and depriving them of voting rights for five years.⁸³ In January of 2021, thirty GI members, once again as part of the Defend Europe movement, occupied the Col du Portillon mountain pass, located in the Pyrenees mountain range on the border

⁷⁹ Al Jazeera Staff, “Defend Europe Boat Tries to Block Migrant Rescues,” *Al Jazeera*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/7/17/defend-europe-boat-tries-to-block-migrant-rescues>.

⁸⁰ Lizzie Dearden, “Police Arrest Far-Right Activists as Protesters Block Bridges with Burning Tyres to Stop Refugees Entering Calais,” *Independent*, March 12, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/police-arrest-farright-activists-as-protesters-block-bridges-with-burning-tyres-to-stop-refugees-entering-calais-a6927351.html>.

⁸¹ Dearden.

⁸² France 24, “Far-Right Activists Block Alps Pass Used by Migrants,” *France 24*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180421-far-right-activists-generation-identityblock-alps-pass-used-migrants-col-Echelle>.

⁸³ News Wires, “French Far-Right Activists Handed Jail Time for Alpine Anti-Migrant Operation,” *France 24*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190829-france-far-right-activists-generation-identity-prison-sentence-alps-anti-migrant-operation>.

of France and Spain.⁸⁴ As xenophobic as these demonstrations are, they can be categorized as non-violent in that they do not result in large numbers of deaths or injuries.

The 2018 Al Jazeera documentary, “Generation Hate,” profiled GI leaders in Lille, a city in the north of France only 70 miles east of Calais and just south of the Belgian border. In this piece, an undercover journalist took audio and video which details the level of held by these GI members towards the migrant community in France, despite its claims to be a “non-violent, non-racist political movement.”⁸⁵ Footage shows members describing how they might drive a truck into a crowded market known to be frequented by Muslims and beating up people of Middle Eastern descent in the middle of the street while using Nazi slogans.⁸⁶ The majority of the interactions took place inside a known Identitarian safe haven, a bar called the Citadelle.⁸⁷ During the National Front Congress, the same convention where Marine Le Pen rebranded her party to separate itself from its controversially xenophobic past, several party members and Le Pen associates met at the Citadelle.⁸⁸ There, they openly discussed their self-identification as Identitarians and rationalized Le Pen’s motives for distancing the party despite sharing core values.⁸⁹ High-ranking officials and National Front delegates, such as Jean-François Pedrono, an influential party member who in the documentary admits to the undercover journalist that he has long-held racist views and a proclivity for violence; Nicolas Crochet, the former National Front campaigns accountant; and Frederic Chatillon, Marine Le Pen’s campaign communications adviser were caught on undercover footage candidly participating in these

⁸⁴ Robin Serradeil, “Anti-Migrant Operation in the Pyrenees: A Special Office Seized to Investigate Generation Identity,” *La Depeche*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2021/02/15/operation-anti-migrants-dans-les-pyrenees-un-office-special-saisi-pour-enqueter-sur-generation-identitaire-9374803.php>.

⁸⁵ *Generation Hate, Part 1* (Al Jazeera, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/26/generation-hate-part-1>; *Generation Hate, Part 2* (Al Jazeera, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/26/generation-hate-part-2>.

⁸⁶ Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 2* (Al Jazeera, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/26/generation-hate-part-2>.

⁸⁷ Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 1* (Al Jazeera, 2018), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/26/generation-hate-part-1>; Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 2*.

⁸⁸ Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 1*; Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 2*.

⁸⁹ Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 1*; Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 2*.

conversations.⁹⁰ Crochet and Chatillon, Marine Le Pen's longtime friends and recognized "men in the shadows" were then facing charges of campaign fraud and were not allowed to formally associate with the National Rally.⁹¹ Chatillon's far right roots extend into his youth; he is associated as one of the presidents of the Groupe Union Défense (GUD), whose alum include attempted assassin Maxime Bruniere.⁹² Christelle Lechevalier, Marine Le Pen's replacement in the European Union, was also present at the Identitarian bar, despite public proclamations that pro-violence groups would remain at the fringes.⁹³ She also admits that "Most Frontist politicians, like most National Front leaders, hold Identitarian views. It's just the party line now that forbids us from following the Identitarian line."⁹⁴ She further admits that the line of thinking was established by Jean-Marie Le Pen, and his daughter recognized this and therefore excommunicated him from the party.⁹⁵ Additionally, she states that Marine Le Pen agrees with their views, but doesn't want them publicized because it would confirm negative perceptions held by the public and alienate voters they were trying to gain.⁹⁶ Eric Dillies, the former head of the National Front in Lille, and his wife, Sylvie Goddyn, a National Front Member of the European Parliament, also made appearances at the bar as depicted on film; both admit that it was a risk to be seen there, but that they share Identitarian values and their solidarity with the movement would protect them against scrutiny.⁹⁷

The release of this documentary dealt a blow to Marine Le Pen's efforts to detach her party from far-right extremism, and she claimed to have expelled members who held such views from the party and banned non-members from ever joining.⁹⁸ GI members

⁹⁰ Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 2*.

⁹¹ *Al Jazeera*.

⁹² Jon Henley, "Neo-Nazi Gunman Tries to Assassinate Chirac," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jul/15/thefarright.france>.

⁹³ Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 1*; Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 2*.

⁹⁴ Al Jazeera, *Generation Hate, Part 2*.

⁹⁵ Al Jazeera.

⁹⁶ Al Jazeera.

⁹⁷ Al Jazeera.

⁹⁸ Al Jazeera.

claimed that the Citadelle was no longer affiliated with the movement, and that it “followed its own ideological course” even while it was affiliated.⁹⁹ In 2021, by direction of President Macron, the group was dissolved due to allegations that it incited “discrimination, hatred, and violence” and was likened to a “private militia.”¹⁰⁰ Despite protest against its dissolution, most notably and carefully by Marine Le Pen, on August 24, 2021, a controversial law targeting separatist activity, originally targeted towards Muslim extremists, passed with provisions to include other forms of supremacism as well – including the kind practiced by the GI.¹⁰¹ Scholars, such as far-right expert Jean-Yves Camus, argue that because of its formal disintegration, Identitarian “activism” will change its focus from physical demonstrations to online activity. Though the GI website was taken down, it can still publish its bimonthly magazine, *La Revue Identitaire*, and operate its “three militant ‘identity houses’ in Lyon, Nice and Rouen” along with “the GI’s martial arts club which remains active in Lyon.”¹⁰²

Despite the efforts President Macron made in combating terrorism in France, there has been growing frustration with him and his administration since assuming the presidency in 2017.¹⁰³ Macron has been criticized for being out of touch with the working population, inspiring the Yellow Vest movement street protests which has incorporated frustration with Macron’s handling of the COVID-19 vaccinations.¹⁰⁴ Despite growing public dissatisfaction, Macron was reelected to the presidency in 2022. He acknowledged that he did not come by his win because everyone who voted in his favor in the second round believed in his ideals rather, they trusted his vision more than Le Pen’s despite her moderated platform. Her highly scrutinized connection to and tacit support of Russia

⁹⁹ Camus, “Génération Identitaire Ban Could Rally Supporters of the Radical Right in France.”

¹⁰⁰ France 24, “France Bans Far-Right Anti-Migrant Group Generation Identity,” *France 24*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210303-france-bans-far-right-anti-migrant-group-generation-identity>.

¹⁰¹ Camus, “Génération Identitaire Ban Could Rally Supporters of the Radical Right in France.”

¹⁰² Camus.

¹⁰³ France 24, “French Politicians Worry about Surge in Pre-Election Violence.”

¹⁰⁴ France 24.

during its 2022 invasion of Ukraine (though connections to Russia were established much earlier) may have also played a role in her failure to be elected.

D. ACTIVE MEASURES

Russia has used a diverse set of active measures tools to influence far-right French society, including using economic leverage and cyber-attacks mixed with disinformation to further its foreign policy goals in France. Government officials and establishments as well as civilian organizations have fallen victim to, or voluntarily taken part in, Russia's manipulation of one of Europe's oldest democracies during a time of "deep political crisis."¹⁰⁵

The most popularly cited Russian active measures operation is an €11 billion (valued at USD \$12.2 billion at the time) loan to Le Pen's National Rally party in 2014 by the First Czech Russian Bank, a small bank with connections to the Kremlin.¹⁰⁶ The party was unable to raise enough revenue to sustain a campaign as French banks refused to loan to them because of its "racist and anti-Semitic" history.¹⁰⁷ Le Pen subsequently expressed support for Putin's annexation of Crimea and disapproval of the EU's sanctions levied (which she vowed to work towards lifting, if elected).¹⁰⁸ Le Pen was highly criticized for this move at the time; criticism reemerged when she met with President Putin as his guest in the Kremlin in 2017, just a month before the French presidential elections.¹⁰⁹ Mr. Putin acknowledged the elections and explicitly stated that Russia had no desire to "influence events in any way."¹¹⁰ Defenders of the exchange have stated that the National Rally under both Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen have always been in favor of cooperation with Russia therefore the loan was not political or an exchange for the party's support.¹¹¹ In any case,

¹⁰⁵ Alina Polyakova et al., "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses," November 15, 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/kremlin-trojan-horses/>. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Gatehouse, "Marine Le Pen: Who's Funding France's Far Right?"

¹⁰⁷ Gatehouse.

¹⁰⁸ Gatehouse.

¹⁰⁹ Gatehouse.

¹¹⁰ Gatehouse.

¹¹¹ Gatehouse.

Le Pen's meeting with Putin, as the leader of one of the world's great powers, gave some her some level of international validation, and affirmed Putin's interests in France and the EU.¹¹² One can only speculate on whether this meeting helped or hurt Le Pen – she trailed Emmanuel Macron by only three points in the first round of the 2017 elections (held on April 23) before losing by thirty three points in the second round (held on May 7).¹¹³

Following Russia's financial support to the National Front an effort to further its foreign policy goals in France and Western Europe (and one which is legal in France due to weak "restrictions on foreign funding of domestic political campaigns") the Kremlin supported a multi-domain approach later in the election cycle with a hacking operation during France's 2017 Presidential elections.¹¹⁴ French electoral law states that in the two days prior to an election, candidates and media outlets are required to cease campaigning and all election coverage, but there is no law prohibiting or penalizing "foreign electronic election interference."¹¹⁵ The day before the media blackout of election coverage was set to begin, a large collection of stolen files from members of then-candidate Macron's En Marche! staffers (his speechwriter, party treasurer, and senior political consultant, among others) was released through a variety of information sharing websites, including 4chan and WikiLeaks.¹¹⁶ Media outlets began reporting that there had been an information leak with no further details on what it was or what the political implications would be.¹¹⁷ Macron's staff released a rebuttal statement online just hours before the required silence, detailing that forgeries were planted alongside real documents with the alleged intent to

¹¹² Gatehouse.

¹¹³ France 24, "French 2017 Presidential Election," *France 24*, April 23, 2017, <https://graphics.france24.com/results-first-round-french-presidential-election-2017/>.

¹¹⁴ Margaret L. Taylor, "Combating Disinformation and Foreign Interference in Democracies: Lessons from Europe," *Lawfare Institute*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2019/07/31/combating-disinformation-and-foreign-interference-in-democracies-lessons-from-europe/>.

¹¹⁵ Joseph Downing and Wasim Ahmed, "#MacronLeaks as a 'Warning Shot' for European Democracies: Challenges to Election Blackouts Presented by Social Media and Election Meddling during the 2017 French Presidential Election," *French Politics* 17, no. 3 (September 2019): 257–78, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-019-00090-w>. 266.

¹¹⁶ Matt Tait, "The Macron Leaks: Are They Real, and Is It Russia?," *Lawfare Institute*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/macron-leaks-are-they-real-and-it-russia>.

¹¹⁷ Downing and Ahmed, "#MacronLeaks as a 'Warning Shot' for European Democracies." 257–278.

sow discord.¹¹⁸ Digital forensics proved this assertion, and that some of the documents were genuine, and others proved to be categorically falsified.¹¹⁹ For example, the metadata was removed from many of the documents; however, some were not sanitized completely, and traces of editing done by a “user with a Russian name using a Russian version of Microsoft Excel on March 27, 2017” were identified.¹²⁰ Traditional media was unable to provide the public with follow-up information, directing interest and discourse to social media and “marginal media outlets” which do not necessarily hold the same journalistic standards that mainstream outlets do.¹²¹

In one study, researchers analyzed Twitter activity as a primary vehicle for this discourse and tracked its flow with the hashtag #MacronLeaks.¹²² Their analysis identified five influential players, the most notable of whom were Wikileaks and Emmanuel Macron himself.¹²³ Five main themes were extracted from the : first, conspiracy theories which promoted the idea that Macron was unfairly favored in the political landscape; second, anti-Macron messaging alleging his dishonesty and corruption and tying him to recent terror attacks; third, references to the timing of the release with the media blackout to create an “atmosphere of uncertainty”; fourth, references to Russia as sympathetic to the right (especially to Marine Le Pen) or the evidence of Russian document tampering; and fifth, Wikileaks, as the main promulgator of the leaked information and its portrayal as a reliable source of information.¹²⁴ Despite the attack at a crucial point in the election, Macron was elected to a five-year term with 66.06% of the vote (compared to Le Pen’s 33.94%).¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Tait, “The Macron Leaks: Are They Real, and Is It Russia?”

¹¹⁹ Tait.

¹²⁰ Tait.

¹²¹ Downing and Ahmed, “#MacronLeaks as a ‘Warning Shot’ for European Democracies.” 268.

¹²² Downing and Ahmed. 257–278.

¹²³ Downing and Ahmed. 267–268.

¹²⁴ Downing and Ahmed. 273–274.

¹²⁵ BBC News, “Emmanuel Macron Defeats Le Pen to Become French President,” *BBC News*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39839349>.

Russian hackers have also targeted civilian media organizations to further foreign policy goals. In April 2015, just a few months after the Charlie Hebdo attack, the worldwide broadcasting French TV station TV5 Monde was launching a new channel.¹²⁶ On the evening of the launch, the network went offline for several hours after a compromised system infected several others on the network, interrupting its broadcasts across a dozen channels.¹²⁷ Technicians began troubleshooting immediately as they were already present to ensure the smooth launch of the newest channel.¹²⁸ The attack was mitigated when the infected computer was discovered and disconnected from the internet and the rest of TV5 Monde's network.¹²⁹ A group calling itself the Cyber Caliphate, in alliance with the Islamic State, claimed responsibility for the attack by posting messages in French, Arabic, and English on the channel's social media pages as a shockwave attack designed to remind the French public that Islamic extremists continued to be a threat as long as France was intervening in the Middle East – but further analysis led to a different conclusion.¹³⁰ Investigators determined that the first intrusion occurred at the end of January as a reconnaissance operation which provided the knowledge base needed for hackers to understand how the station broadcasted its signals and then tailor malware to “corrupt and destroy the internet-connected hardware that controlled the TV station's operations – such as the encoder systems used to transmit programmes.”¹³¹ The hackers had extensive knowledge of both TV5 Monde's broadcasting and its suppliers – they targeted a Dutch company because it “supplied the remote-control cameras used in TV5's studio.”¹³² The complexity of the cyber-attack was highly uncharacteristic for Islamic extremists, who are

¹²⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, “Compromise of TV5 Monde” (Council on Foreign Relations, April 2015), <https://www.cfr.org/cyber-operations/compromise-tv5-monde>.

¹²⁷ Council on Foreign Relations.

¹²⁸ Council on Foreign Relations.

¹²⁹ Gordon Corera, “How France's TV5 Was Almost Destroyed by ‘Russian Hackers,’” *France 24*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-37590375>.

¹³⁰ Corera.

¹³¹ Council on Foreign Relations, “Compromise of TV5 Monde.”

¹³² Council on Foreign Relations; Corera, “How France's TV5 Was Almost Destroyed by ‘Russian Hackers’”; Emmanuel Paquette, “Hacking of TV5 Monde: The Investigation Is Moving towards the Russian Track,” *L'Express*, September 6, 2015, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/medias/piratage-de-tv5-monde-la-piste-russe_1687673.html.

better known for physical terrorism (as opposed to cyber terrorism) in France, but did fit a pattern of behavior characteristic of Russian cyber operations across Europe, including “Russia’s institutionalized systematic ‘trolling’-devoting substantive resources to fulltime staff who plant commend and content online that is often disruptive, and always favorable to President Putin.”¹³³ Further, several technical details help to confirm the attack’s origin. Information about the attack was published on a site which “was hosted on the same block of Internet Protocol addresses and used the same domain name server as the group called APT28.”¹³⁴ Additionally, investigation by U.S. cybersecurity company FireEye revealed that “code used in the attack had been typed on a Cyrillic keyboard at times of day corresponding to working hours in St Petersburg or Moscow.”¹³⁵ In October 2018 the UK government attributed the “false flag” operation (an attack in which “a threat actor tries to make its identity by leaving clues or attributes that would cause the victim to pin the blame on someone else), to a Russian hacking group.¹³⁶

E. THE RUSSIAN HISTORICAL CONNECTION

France and Russia have maintained significant and overall positive cultural, political, and economic connections for centuries. France became a popular destination for Russian expatriates and political refugees with the diasporas following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution (known as the White emigration), during the Cold War, and after the fall of the

¹³³ Corera, “How France’s TV5 Was Almost Destroyed by ‘Russian Hackers’”; Joseph Menn and Leigh Thomas, “France Probes Russian Lead in TV5 Monde Hacking: Sources,” *Reuters*, June 10, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-russia-cybercrime/france-probes-russian-lead-in-tv5monde-hacking-sources-idINKBN0OQ2GG20150610>.

¹³⁴ Joseph Menn and Leigh Thomas, “France Probes Russian Lead in TV5 Monde Hacking: Sources.”; Advanced Persistent Threat Group 28 (APT28) is a hacking group associated with the Russian spy agency GRU.

¹³⁵ Menn and Thomas.

¹³⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, “Compromise of TV5 Monde”; National Cyber Security Centre, “Reckless Campaign of Cyber Attacks by Russian Military Intelligence Service Exposed,” *National Cyber Security Centre*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.ncsc.gov.uk/news/reckless-campaign-cyber-attacks-russian-military-intelligence-service-exposed>.

Soviet Union in 1991.¹³⁷ Many of those exiled settled outside of Paris or in “large industrial mining areas in the north and east.”¹³⁸ These settlements of ethnic Russians – the exact size of which is unknown, as France does not keep census data regarding ethnicity, among other identifying factors, as a result of atrocities in World War II – provides justification for the Kremlin to take special interest in France and build a “bridge” to connect them back to the motherland through cultural organizations.¹³⁹ This population, estimated by scholar Marlene Laruelle to have been around 50,000 in 2010, is divided in its support for the regime as many left their homes because they were no longer willing to withstand the societal and economic repression they experienced in their homeland.¹⁴⁰ Those with the means and desire to promote Russia abroad, many being descendants of well-known Russian families in France, have successfully maintained cultural and economic relationships between the two nations.¹⁴¹

Center-right French government officials have also promoted positive relations with Russia on these fronts. In the 1940s, Charles de Gaulle set a precedent of carefully balancing relations with the United States (and other Western European nations) and Russia.¹⁴² This has bred a culture of caution amongst some parts of the French political elite with regards to Western commitments in NATO.¹⁴³ General de Gaulle considered Russia to be an “essential pillar” of Europe and advocated for balancing relations between

¹³⁷ Marlene Laruelle, “Russian Soft Power in France: Assessing Moscow’s Cultural and Business Para-Diplomacy,” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, Russian Soft Power in France (2017-2018), January 8, 2018, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/series/russian-soft-power-in-france/russian-soft-power-in-france-assessing-moscows-cultural-and-business-para-diplomacy>.

¹³⁸ Laruelle.

¹³⁹ Laruelle.

¹⁴⁰ Laruelle.

¹⁴¹ Laruelle; Camus, “French Political Parties and Russia: The Politics of Power and Influence,” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, Russian Soft Power in France (2017-2018), June 13, 2018, https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/french-political-parties-and-russia-the-politics-of-power-and-influence.

¹⁴² Camus, “French Political Parties and Russia: The Politics of Power and Influence.”

¹⁴³ Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses.” 11.

Russia and the United States.¹⁴⁴ In 1944, de Gaulle signed an alliance treaty with the Soviet Union and followed up with a bilateral trade agreement during his second term in 1964.¹⁴⁵ In 1965, de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO, the organization established to “keep the Russians out” with the goal of regaining France’s “whole territory the exercise of her sovereignty.”¹⁴⁶ France’s withdrawal from NATO fractured its relationships with its European allies and the United States, requiring significant repair efforts in future administrations. Presidents Mitterrand, Chirac, and Sarkozy sought to rebalance France’s relationship with and role within NATO, rejoining in 2009, while simultaneously fostering relations with Russia.¹⁴⁷ Many high-profile members of these administrations continue to publicly advocate for dialogue with Russia, using their societal positions to invoke “common geopolitical, cultural, and historical interests that should, they claim, transcend the difficult but temporary phase of Putin’s tenure in office.”¹⁴⁸ Russian influence on right-leaning French officials can be interpreted as coerced – an interaction reported by journalist Nicolas Henin describes an exchange where Putin essentially threatens France’s bilateral relationship with France if Sarkozy continued to question his alleged human rights abuses.¹⁴⁹ Russia benefits from support at lower levels of French government as well. Thierry Mariani, President Sarkozy’s Minister of Transportation for 2010–2012, is a known supporter of Russia and founder of La Droite Populaire, a pro-Russian faction of the Les Republicains party (a mainstream center-right party known as the UMP).¹⁵⁰ Its members support “tougher immigration and asylum policies, as well as for a narrower definition of French identity,” concerns which coincide with Identitarian ideals, in addition

¹⁴⁴ Camus, “French Political Parties and Russia: The Politics of Power and Influence”; Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses.” 8.

¹⁴⁵ Camus, “French Political Parties and Russia: The Politics of Power and Influence.” 2.

¹⁴⁶ Erin Blakemore, “When France Pulled the Plug on a Crucial Part of NATO” (History.com, February 9, 2022), <https://www.history.com/news/france-nato-withdrawal-charles-de-gaulle>; Camus, “French Political Parties and Russia: The Politics of Power and Influence.”

¹⁴⁷ Camus, “French Political Parties and Russia: The Politics of Power and Influence.”

¹⁴⁸ Camus.

¹⁴⁹ Camus.

¹⁵⁰ Camus.

to defending “a political program that intersected with Russia’s major political strategies.”¹⁵¹

Today, the National Front leader enjoys the Kremlin’s support, especially through financial “investment in the party’s political future.”¹⁵² Le Pen expressed early on in her leadership that she would like to meet with President Putin, and encouraged her niece, Marion Marechal, to visit the embassy “often.”¹⁵³ Other high ranking National Front party officials cultivated relationships through visits to the Kremlin.¹⁵⁴ This is likely encouraging for President Putin, who has forged relationships with foreign politicians (such as those from the National Rally) who ideologically align with his strong man leadership style, anti-American and anti-NATO sentiments, and defense of Christian values.¹⁵⁵ Putin has shown his support economically; subsequently, Le Pen vocalized support for Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, stating that “Mr. Putin is a patriot. He is attached to the sovereignty of his people. He is aware that we defend common values. These are the values of European civilization.”¹⁵⁶ She advocated for an “advanced strategic alliance, with Russia, which should be embodied in a continental European axis running from Paris to Berlin to Moscow.”¹⁵⁷ Her party supports the Kremlin’s “vision for a federalized Ukraine that would give broad autonomy to Russian-speaking regions and the occupied territories of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.”¹⁵⁸

In addition to financial support to political endeavors, many French politicians support pro-Russian positions because of the economic ties between the two nations across

¹⁵¹ Camus.

¹⁵² Nicolas Lebourg, “The French Far Right in Russia’s Orbit,” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, Russian Soft Power in France (2017-2018), May 15, 2018, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/series/russian-soft-power-in-france/the-french-far-right-in-russias-orbit>; Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses.” 10.

¹⁵³ Lebourg, “The French Far Right in Russia’s Orbit.”

¹⁵⁴ Polyakova et al., “The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses.” 9.

¹⁵⁵ Polyakova et al. 9.

¹⁵⁶ Polyakova et al. 9.

¹⁵⁷ Polyakova et al. 9.

¹⁵⁸ Polyakova et al. 9.

a variety of industries.¹⁵⁹ French businesses in defense, energy, food and luxury, transport, and banking industries operate heavily in Russia.¹⁶⁰ Close connections between the leaders of these companies and Kremlin associates present a conduit from the Russian government to France by way of economic influence.¹⁶¹

Cultural, economic, and political factors keep France and Russia connected in both the long and short term. Superseding those ties are the deeply rooted ideological connections that may be the most influential factor in Russian influence in France. Like Russians, the French believe themselves and their nation to be culturally, historically, and politically exceptional, forming a sense of mutually understood nationalism between the two.¹⁶² In this way, France respects Russia's "desire for affirmation as a country," and accepts its current state as part of its evolution.¹⁶³ Both nations have large segments of their populations which share "sovereigntist" values that prioritize national interests over international ones, express ambiguity with regard to "multilateral and particularly transatlantic institutions," advocate for protectionist economic policies, and the protection of traditional values through the rejection of immigration (most prominently seen on the right).¹⁶⁴

F. THE RUSSIAN MEDIA CONNECTION

According to Freedom House, France maintains a generally free and open media environment which represents a "wide range of political opinions."¹⁶⁵ France is home to "intellectually vibrant" media outlets, especially in its "print magazine and online press,

¹⁵⁹ Polyakova et al. 8.

¹⁶⁰ Polyakova et al. 8.

¹⁶¹ Polyakova et al. 8.

¹⁶² Camus, "French Political Parties and Russia: The Politics of Power and Influence."

¹⁶³ Camus.

¹⁶⁴ Laruelle, "Russian Soft Power in France: Assessing Moscow's Cultural and Business Para-Diplomacy."

¹⁶⁵ Freedom House, "Freedom House Index 2021."

and contribute to the political and intellectual life.”¹⁶⁶ As in nations across the world, the consumption of printed media is declining as access to non-print media (television broadcast, radio, internet) is rising.¹⁶⁷ The largest national television and radio broadcasting companies, France TV and Radio France, are owned by the state; the state also regulates these markets, and the High Council for Audiovisual supervises the “attribution of radio and TV frequencies.”¹⁶⁸ Many newspapers are reliant on government subsidies and the backing of wealthy companies and business people as advertising and paid circulation revenue fail to cover operational costs.¹⁶⁹ The increasing cost of print media has shifted outlets toward digital publication, allowing for the emergence of diverse alternatives to mainstream media which prominently feature fringe political views.¹⁷⁰ If and when these sources are rejected from the mainstream media, which is owned by a small percentage of the French elite in conjunction with the state, consumers of alternative media grow in their distrust of traditional institutions. Russia has capitalized on this distrust by offering its own alternative sources, using its own state-owned networks as a gateway into French society where one may not otherwise exist by providing a perspective as an alternative to what French media provides.¹⁷¹ Some argue that Russia uses this to paralyze the decision-making process, while others believe that it brings “fresh air to a crowded yet homogenous media landscape.”¹⁷²

Russia maintains a media presence in France, as it does in many other nations it seeks to influence; however, presence does not necessarily equate to influence in this case.¹⁷³ Russia has sought out partnerships with France in this space; one such example is

¹⁶⁶ Matthieu Lardeau, “France” (Media Landscapes, 2022), <https://medialandscapes.org/country/france>.

¹⁶⁷ Lardeau.

¹⁶⁸ Lardeau.

¹⁶⁹ Lardeau.

¹⁷⁰ Lardeau.

¹⁷¹ Elian Peltier, “RT Brings Its Russian Perspective to France,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/world/europe/rt-france-television.html>.

¹⁷² Peltier.

¹⁷³ Laruelle, “Russian Soft Power in France: Assessing Moscow’s Cultural and Business Paradiplomacy.”

Le Figaro, which once (but no longer) published a monthly supplement of Russian news in conjunction with Russia's daily newspaper, Rossiiskaia gazeta.¹⁷⁴ Russia also relies on alternative press outlets, created both by Russia and organically in France, which circulate pro-Russian (and often far-right) messages amongst the portion of the population that already distrusts mainstream media.¹⁷⁵ Russia has also expanded its organic media outlets, RT and Sputnik, tailoring them to international audiences.¹⁷⁶ Both networks represent themselves as independent media outlets; however, it is widely known that both are financed by the Kremlin.¹⁷⁷ RT launched its French platform in 2014, with Sputnik following in early 2015, and "have always been criticized for their biased view on French affairs, on which they present only minority viewpoints, and for their role as mouthpieces for the Russian authorities."¹⁷⁸

G. EFFECTS OF ACTIVE MEASURES

Russia's loan to Marine Le Pen and the National Front, the hack into President Emmanuel Macron's email servers, and cyber interference with French news outlets have added to the discourse regarding Russian influence in Western affairs. Attributing these operations to Russia (even if they were carried out covertly, as in the TV5 Monde cyber-attack) unified France in raising awareness for cybersecurity against Russian operations with countermeasures set in place by both government and civilian entities.¹⁷⁹ Since the Russia's interference in the 2016 elections, the government has maintained a transparent dialogue with its citizens while taking precautions to protect its electoral processes from foreign meddling, such as hardening the supporting infrastructure, quickly informing of potential cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, ensuring secure elections until the

¹⁷⁴ Laruelle.

¹⁷⁵ Laruelle.

¹⁷⁶ Laruelle.

¹⁷⁷ Laruelle.

¹⁷⁸ Laruelle.

¹⁷⁹ Laura Daniels, "How Russia Hacked the French Election," *Politico*, April 23, 2017, [Politico.eu/article/france-election-2017-russia-hacked-cyberattacks/](https://www.politico.eu/article/france-election-2017-russia-hacked-cyberattacks/).

pandemic has passed, and support the accessibility of elections.¹⁸⁰ Transparency and availability of information about potential for manipulation, either directly from foreign actors or domestic actors who buy into foreign ideology, is key for the public because it makes it more critical of the motivations behind pieces of information rather than simply believing a claim at face value.¹⁸¹ Government efforts and a critical population compose an information environment in which active measures do not significantly affect the way the public behaves when presented with information designed to turn individuals against each other and erode democracy.

The French government's first initiative was clear communication of vulnerabilities by the National Commission of the Control of the Electoral Campaign for the Presidential Election (CNCCEP).¹⁸² This created resiliency within the democratic system by allowing the population to evaluate information encountered with a more critical mindset, preventing more people from becoming enclosed in an echo chamber of disinformation. Further, in 2017, the French government established Viginum, an agency which has monitored foreign digital information operations targeting France through the 2022 elections.¹⁸³

Prominent media sources, such as Le Monde, have launched platforms which "verify the reliability of a piece of information's source."¹⁸⁴ The French polling commission, a government, "issued a warning against polls deemed illegitimate under French law, after Kremlin-controlled news outlet Sputnik pushed out polls that showed François Fillon, a Russia-friendly candidate, to be in the lead."¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ David Levine and Gesine Weber, "French Voters Should Consider Election Integrity Issues as They Vote in 2022," *German Marshall Fund*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/french-voters-should-consider-election-integrity-issues-they-vote-2022>.

¹⁸¹ David Levine and Gesine Weber.

¹⁸² David Levine and Gesine Weber.

¹⁸³ David Levine and Gesine Weber.

¹⁸⁴ Daniels, "How Russia Hacked the French Election."

¹⁸⁵ Daniels.

On March 2, 2022, the EU instated a temporary ban on broadcasts from RT and Sputnik in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's use of their state-owned media platforms to propagate disinformation.¹⁸⁶ RT and Sputnik are making attempts to circumvent this ban by republishing their articles verbatim on other media outlets, and widespread legislation banning access to these sites increases their appeal to conspiracy theorists who believe the government is trying to conceal the truth.¹⁸⁷ The ban can also be overcome by users who use a virtual private network (VPN) to obscure their locations.¹⁸⁸ Overall interaction with these entities, especially on social media, has decreased significantly in France since the ban has been enacted, however, this has been met with a significant impact "in the posting activity of and engagements with the social media accounts affiliated with the Russian Embassy in France."¹⁸⁹ The analysis of policy implications in real time demonstrates that France continues to combat Russian active measures campaigns with success relative to other democratic counterparts. If active measures have not had a significant effect on the population, the question remains: how is Russia able to continue to influence French democracy?

H. CONCLUSION

France and Russia share a cultural and economic history which has united French and Russian politicians across the political spectrum, Russia to continue to influence those in France who sympathize with it.¹⁹⁰ Russian influence already permeates French society; I believe this to be the reason that Russian active measures have not elicited high levels of violent reactions. This does not imply that the French are willfully ignorant of Russian

¹⁸⁶ Sara Bundtzen and Mauritius Dorn, "Banning RT and Sputnik Across Europe: What Does It Hold for the Future of Platform Regulation?" (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, April 5, 2022), www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/banning-rt-and-sputnik-across-europe-what-does-it-hold-for-the-future-of-platform-regulation/.

¹⁸⁷ Bundtzen and Dorn.

¹⁸⁸ Bundtzen and Dorn.

¹⁸⁹ Bret Schafer and Etienne Soula, "Implementation and Impact of the RT and Sputnik Ban on French Online Ecosystems," German Marshall Fund, Alliance Securing Democracy, April 8, 2022, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/implementation-and-impact-of-the-rt-and-sputnik-ban-on-french-online-ecosystems/>.

¹⁹⁰ Daniels, "How Russia Hacked the French Election"; Laruelle, "Russian Soft Power in France: Assessing Moscow's Cultural and Business Para-Diplomacy."

influence; perhaps they are more aware of it than other nations and are simply more willing to incorporate it into their society. Russia has overtly and covertly manipulated the French information environment but has so far failed to achieve the gold standard of active measures – dividing democratic populations against each other. The results of the 2022 presidential elections demonstrated a clear “surge in support for far-right candidates,” with Le Pen earning over 40% of the vote.¹⁹¹ In the final debate held two days before the second round of elections, Macron reinvigorated the conversation surrounding the National Front’s Russian loan controversy, accusing Le Pen of being “dependent on the Russian government” and on President Putin, whom Macron coined as “her banker.”¹⁹² When challenged on her views regarding Muslim women wearing headscarves in public, she confirmed her position to ban it as “a uniform imposed by Islamists.”¹⁹³ She doubled down on her claims against immigration by vowing to “put an end to anarchic and massive immigration into France” as it was a cause of a worsening crime epidemic.¹⁹⁴ Macron countered her points by stating that her proposals against Muslim culture would “contradict France’s secular rules and would trigger civil war in a country that has the largest Muslim population in Western Europe.”¹⁹⁵ Voter turnout, at just under 72%, was at its lowest since 1969; some voters even cast blank ballots in an effort to “punish the sitting president.”¹⁹⁶ Macron acknowledged this in his victory speech, pledging to be “the president of everyone.”¹⁹⁷ It is impossible to foresee how Russia will manipulate the French public and what results it brings; however, Russia will likely continue to carry out active measures

¹⁹¹ Benjamin Dodman, “‘Victory’ in Defeat? Le Pen Raises the Far Right’s Glass Ceiling, Fails to Crack It.”

¹⁹² “Macron and Le Pen Clash on Russia, Economy in Feisty Debate Ahead of Presidential Run-Off,” *France 24*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220420-live-macron-and-le-pen-face-off-in-debate-ahead-of-french-presidential-run-off>.

¹⁹³ Benjamin Dodman, “‘Victory’ in Defeat? Le Pen Raises the Far Right’s Glass Ceiling, Fails to Crack It.”

¹⁹⁴ Benjamin Dodman.

¹⁹⁵ Benjamin Dodman.

¹⁹⁶ Paul Kirby, “French Election Result: Macron Defeats Le Pen and Vows to Unite Divided France,” *BBC News*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61209058>.

¹⁹⁷ Emmanuel Macron, I will be president for all of us, Television, April 24, 2022, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/emmanuel-macron-i-will-be-president-for-all-of-us-4-24-22-transcript>.

campaigns against Macron's administration as it strongly rebukes Putin's actions in Ukraine. The character and stability of France's democracy relies on continued efforts of transparency and critical analysis – anything else risks the possibility of violent effects from societal division along fringe political lines, such as those seen in Germany and the United States.

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III. CASE STUDY II: GERMANY

A. BACKGROUND

Throughout its modern history, Germany has persevered through times of prosperity and depression, unity and division, autocracy and democracy. It emerged as a democratic, federal parliamentary republic in 1949 under the Basic Law, or Grundgesetz.¹⁹⁸ The Basic Law, Germany's constitution, federally recognizes basic tenets of a democratic nation administered and legislated through the unified states, known as Länder.¹⁹⁹ This includes protection against infringements on human dignity, personal freedom; equality under the law; freedom of faith, expression, and assembly; and the ability to make a life for oneself through family formation, pursuit of education and choice of occupation.²⁰⁰ States are permitted significant sovereignty so long as they do not violate federal regulations as defined in the Basic Law.²⁰¹ Scarred by the atrocities of its past, most notably under Hitler's totalitarian Third Reich and the devastation of World War II, the Federal Republic of Germany has implemented safeguards to protect against the reconsolidation of power and carefully rebuilt itself to become one of the most democratically stable nations in the world.²⁰² It is the most populous nation in the European Union, has a powerhouse economy, maintains a world renowned "watchdog" media apparatus which encourages political transparency, and is an integral part of regional and international institutions – all factors which, when combined with assurances provided under the Basic Law, have solidified its placement with a score of 94 out of 100 in Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 2021" index.²⁰³

¹⁹⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Germany," accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany>.

¹⁹⁹ Federal Ministry of Justice, Federal Office of Justice, "Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany" (Federal Ministry of Justice, Federal Office of Justice, September 29, 2020), https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html.

²⁰⁰ Federal Ministry of Justice, Federal Office of Justice.

²⁰¹ Federal Ministry of Justice, Federal Office of Justice.

²⁰² Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2021: Germany."

²⁰³ Freedom House.

Germany's recognition as a modern-day beacon of freedom and democracy in Europe, especially considering its history, is increasingly threatened by an increasingly tense domestic environment. Contemporary German politics have suffered from an interesting paradox – friction resulted not from increased polarization, rather, from a perceived trend of political homogeneity which led to extreme polarization.²⁰⁴ Experts on the subject have opined that political stabilization achieved through political coalitions since Angela Merkel became chancellor in 2005 has created a perception that there is no longer an opposition present in the Bundestag (German Parliament).²⁰⁵ This perception combined with Merkel's presentation of *alternativlos* (without alternative) policies, especially regarding the eurozone debt crisis of 2013 and the refugee crisis of 2015, provoked a backlash on both sides of the political aisle and evoked feelings of distrust in the democratic system.²⁰⁶ Germans are perceived to take their right to question governmental authority very seriously, but there is a fine line between questioning political decisions and policies in an effort to strengthen the system and questioning the legitimacy system itself.²⁰⁷ The more pronounced participation of extreme political positions, such as Die Linke (The Left) on the far left and Alternativ für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, or AfD) on the far right exist on this line, portraying themselves as alternatives to dangerous mainstream political conventions.²⁰⁸ While the existence of both extremes is important to acknowledge, I will focus on the rise of the AfD due to the notable levels of political violence carried out by its members and those in ideological alignment.²⁰⁹ Further, I will connect how Russian active measures operations have enriched a divisive political environment in Germany to hasten democratic backsliding.

²⁰⁴ Hans Kudnani, "Germany: A Different Kind of Democratic Dysfunctionality" (American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, January 13, 2021), <https://www.aicgs.org/2021/01/germany-a-different-kind-of-democratic-dysfunctionality/>.

²⁰⁵ Hans Kudnani.

²⁰⁶ Hans Kudnani; Stefan Auer, "Merkel's Germany and the European Union: Between Emergency and the Rule of Rules," *Government and Opposition* 56, no. 1 (January 2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2019.6>; Foa and Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect."

²⁰⁷ Foa and Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect." 6–7.

²⁰⁸ Hans Kudnani, "Germany: A Different Kind of Democratic Dysfunctionality."

²⁰⁹ Alex Berry, "Germany: Right-Wing Criminality at a Record High," *DeutscheWelle (DW)*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-right-wing-criminality-at-a-record-high/a-57421079>.

B. UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT

Understanding the AfD's policy positions is key to understanding them both as a natural ally of Russian authoritarian thought and as a prime target and participant in active measures campaigns. Their stated primary belief is that the state exists to support its citizens as codified in the Basic Law, and that the current political order is not capable of providing this support.²¹⁰ This has resulted in “the breach of law and order, the destruction of the rule of law and irresponsible political action against the principles of economic reason” which can only be remedied by offering alternative choices voiced by direct democracy.²¹¹ Culturally, this is based in the protection of German customs defined by traditional family values, Western Christian culture, German language, and sovereignty as a national state.²¹² At face value, the summary of these policies does not appear to be any more outrageous than another political party. The argument can be made that such views represent diversity of thought in the political environment, functioning as an important benchmark of a healthy democratic society.²¹³

A deeper dive on AfD political rationale detailed in their manifesto reveals alignment with authoritarian tendencies and factors related to flaws in German democracy. Despite marketing itself as an entity which values differences, the AfD Manifesto is rife with rhetoric discounting ideas which defy “traditional German values.”²¹⁴ One such value is the right to create a “traditional family” free from undue political influence; specifically, that children should not be exposed to alternative sexual or gender identities, nor to non-Judeo-Christian religious ideologies.²¹⁵ As self-proclaimed adherents to Western Christianity, the AfD claims that it is religiously tolerant and praises freedom of worship

²¹⁰ Alternativ für Deutschland, “About Us” (Alternativ für Deutschland, 2022), <https://www.afd.de/partei/>.

²¹¹ Alternativ für Deutschland.

²¹² Alternativ für Deutschland.

²¹³ Hans Kudnani, “Germany: A Different Kind of Democratic Dysfunctionality.”

²¹⁴ Alternativ für Deutschland, “Basic Program for Germany” (Berlin: Alternativ für Deutschland, May 2016), https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf.

²¹⁵ Alternativ für Deutschland. 53.

as a tenet of modern society.²¹⁶ This is in stark contrast to its rejection of the practice of Islam in Germany, conflating violent Islamist extremists with peaceful Muslims wishing to coexist in a secular state.²¹⁷ Practices which adhere to Islamic (halal) and Jewish (kosher) food processing are condemned by the AfD due to undue animal cruelty “not compatible...as a national objective.”²¹⁸ The practice of some Muslim women to veil in public places, too, is allegedly incompatible with traditional German values because it puts “barriers between the wearers of these garments and their surroundings, and thus impeded cultural integration and social coexistence.”²¹⁹ Further, the AfD argues that Muslims pose a threat to German cultural purity by being undereducated, undertrained, and underemployed, and have a 1.8 percent birth rate which outpaces that of the ethnic German population.²²⁰

The summary of these policies is only a surface-level review of the AfD’s published ideological rationale – one which explicitly warns of the dilution of German cultural heritage if multiculturalism is allowed to continue.²²¹ The AfD believes that the “pure” German people, as individuals, have the power to protect their government from the corrupt political elite through conversion to direct democracy.²²² Calls to violence do not appear in official AfD policy. However, leaders within the party often make “provocative, if not outright offensive remarks – targeting refugees or evoking Nazi terminology.”²²³ In presenting multiculturalism as an existential danger to German society, and that the

²¹⁶ Alternativ für Deutschland. 47–49.

²¹⁷ Alternativ für Deutschland. 54.

²¹⁸ Alternativ für Deutschland. 86.

²¹⁹ Alternativ für Deutschland. 47–49.

²²⁰ Alternativ für Deutschland. 41.

²²¹ Alternativ für Deutschland. 46.

²²² Alternativ für Deutschland; Matt Golder, “Far Right Parties in Europe,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 19, no. 1 (May 11, 2016): 477–97, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042814-012441>.

²²³ Dagmar Breitenbach and Mark Hallam, “AfD Leaders and Their Most Offensive Remarks,” *DeutscheWelle (DW)*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-leaders-and-their-most-offensive-remarks/g-37651099>.

German people are the only hope for salvation, to an outside observer it appears that they are being called to act with more than just their votes.

C. FAR-RIGHT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS

Conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have caused millions of people to leave their homes. In 2015, nearly one million refugees have migrated to Germany alone, making it a primary destination for asylum seekers due to its “welcome culture.”²²⁴ In the following year, refugees became the targets of over 3,000 hate crimes, a peak accompanied by a rise in support for anti-refugee far right parties such as the AfD.²²⁵ An increasing number of politically motivated violent crimes have been perpetrated by far-right extremists against individuals and groups alike.²²⁶ Attacks against individuals, such as the 2015 knife attack on Cologne Mayor Henriette Reker, the 2019 murder of regional governor Walter Lübcke and the 2020 attack on the Social Democrat’s representative to the Bundestag, Karamba Diaby, have been committed against public officials due to their support of liberal policies.²²⁷ Reker was stabbed in the neck by a far-right extremist, narrowly surviving, and Lübcke was shot on his porch by a neo-Nazi and did not survive; both were both supporters of 2015 referendums allowing the immigration of Syrian war refugees into Germany.²²⁸ Karamba Diaby, a member of the center-left Social Democrat party and the only African-born member of the Bundestag, found bullet holes in the window of his Halle office building; this was widely understood to be a neo-Nazi

²²⁴ Jonas H. Rees et al., “Climate of Hate: Similar Correlates of Far Right Electoral Support and Right-Wing Hate Crimes in Germany,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (October 18, 2019): 2328, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02328>.

²²⁵ Rees et al.

²²⁶ Alex Berry, “Germany: Right-Wing Criminality at a Record High.”

²²⁷ Ben Knight, “Neo-Nazi Convicted of German Politician’s Murder,” *DeutscheWelle (DW)*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/neo-nazi-convicted-of-german-politicians-murder/a-56366905>; DW Staff, “‘Bullet Holes’ Found in German Lawmaker’s Office,” *DeutscheWelle (DW)*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/bullet-holes-found-in-german-lawmakers-office/a-52015151>; Peter Hille, “Right-Wing Terror in Germany: A Timeline,” *DeutscheWelle (DW)*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/right-wing-terror-in-germany-a-timeline/a-52451976>.

²²⁸ Ben Knight, “Neo-Nazi Convicted of German Politician’s Murder”; Peter Hille, “Right-Wing Terror in Germany: A Timeline.”

intimidation attempt.²²⁹ Attacks against groups perpetrated by far-right extremists, such as the February 2020 attack on two shisha bars, killing nine people, and the October 2019 attack on a synagogue in Halle (a city in eastern Germany) on the holiest Jewish holiday of the year, Yom Kippur, are violent illustrations of rising antisemitism and anti-immigrant sentiments.²³⁰ Germany's Federal Criminal Police Agency (BKA) recorded 1,031 attacks on refugee centers in 2015 (at the height of the refugee emergency) and that an average of 70 attacks per quarter occurred between 2014 and 2017.²³¹

Horst Seehofer, the German Interior Minister, presented the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, a domestic intelligence agency known as the BfV) annual report for politically motivated crimes which recognized an increase in politically motivated crimes on both extreme ends of the political spectrum.²³² The report revealed that these "...crimes are increasing significantly" with an 8.5% increase in 2020.²³³ Mr. Seehofer is particularly concerned in the 5.7% increase in crimes committed by right-wing extremists from 2019 to 2020, and that "...the majority of violent crimes classified as politically-motivated were perpetrated by right-wing extremists..." and leading him to state that far-right extremists are one of the "biggest threats for security in our country."²³⁴ These tragic events represent deep cultural cleavages in German society vulnerable to exploitation. Despite economic, cultural, and political ties, Russia's view of Germany as a gateway to the West has made it a prime target for disinformation campaigns designed to exacerbate discord and divide democratic

²²⁹ DW Staff, "'Bullet Holes' Found in German Lawmaker's Office."

²³⁰ Peter Hille, "Right-Wing Terror in Germany: A Timeline."

²³¹ Nicole Goebel, "Refugee Centers in Germany Suffer near Daily Attacks," *DeutscheWelle (DW)*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/refugee-centers-in-germany-suffer-near-daily-attacks/a-41250754>.

²³² Alex Berry, "Germany: Right-Wing Criminality at a Record High."

²³³ Alex Berry.

²³⁴ Alex Berry.

societies.²³⁵ Active measures have been employed by Russia against Germany for decades, some with violent domestic and global consequences.

D. ACTIVE MEASURES

One of the earliest yet most impactful pieces of disinformation originating in Russia is *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.²³⁶ First printed in Moscow in 1905 by Serge Nilus by direction of Russian leadership, *The Protocols* claimed to provide details of a Jewish plot to achieve world domination allegedly discussed at meetings held at Basel, Switzerland, during the same time as the first Zionist congress.²³⁷ It also claimed that by subverting Christian civilization with liberalism and socialism, European capitals were at risk of Jewish domination.²³⁸ The initial impact was domestic – czarist Russians used the document to discredit the Bolshevik movement and encourage the possibilities of antisemitic conspiracies as a root cause of the 1917 Russian Revolution.²³⁹ The *Protocols* reached English, German, and American audiences in the 1920s after its translations into German and English, and has become a foundational text in anti-Semitic groups around the world.²⁴⁰ Beginning in the 1930s, scholars, historians, and intelligence analysts, among others, have recognized and stated that this work was a Russian forgery. The Antidefamation League details that in his book, *Warrant for Genocide*, Professor Norman Cohn explains that the story was appropriated from a “19th-century French political satire

²³⁵ Laura Daniels, “Russian Active Measures in Germany and the United States: Analog Lessons From the Cold War,” *War on the Rocks*, September 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/russian-active-measures-in-germany-and-the-united-states-analog-lessons-from-the-cold-war/>; Jeffrey Mankoff, “Russian Influence Operations in Germany and Their Effect” (Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), February 3, 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-influence-operations-germany-and-their-effect>; Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and Germany: From Estranged Partners to Good Neighbors” (Carnegie Moscow Center, June 6, 2018), <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2018/06/06/russia-and-germany-from-estranged-partners-to-good-neighbors-pub-76540>.

²³⁶ Antidefamation League (ADL), “A Hoax of Hate: The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion” (Antidefamation League (ADL), January 5, 2013), <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/hoax-hate-protocols-learned-elders-zion>.

²³⁷ Antidefamation League (ADL).

²³⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” accessed May 16, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Protocols-of-the-Elders-of-Zion>.

²³⁹ Antidefamation League (ADL), “A Hoax of Hate: The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion.”

²⁴⁰ Antidefamation League (ADL).

in which the alleged plotters weren't even Jewish.”²⁴¹ The message of The Protocols resonated with Hitler as a rising leader and served to rationalize blaming the Jewish population as the “other” responsible for the Christian nation’s severe problems.²⁴² Hitler and his right-hand man, Joseph Goebbels’ private journal entries reveal his acknowledgement of The Protocols as a fake, but leaned on the document’s “inner truth.”²⁴³ The Nazi party reprinted the German translations several times throughout the 1930s, and the ideals contained within it became common knowledge in Germany society so that Bytwerk refers to them as “cultural truisms.”²⁴⁴ This forgery, among other documents, assisted in the formation of the ideological basis for the Holocaust.

A recent example of a disinformation campaign in Germany is the January 2016 “Lisa case,” which contributed to growing Islamophobia and right-wing populism.²⁴⁵ First, Russian TV reported to its Russian speaking public in both Russia and Germany that a thirteen-year-old Russian-German girl named Lisa was kidnapped and raped by three refugees “of Arab origin” over the span of thirty hours.²⁴⁶ This story, along with a viral WhatsApp message detailing the event, caused over 15,000 Russian-speaking people to protest against the acceptance of refugees.²⁴⁷ German authorities quickly debunked the story, but the more Germany pushed back with the facts of the non-incident, the more visible Russia made the story, even accusing Germany of attempting to cover up the alleged

²⁴¹ Antidefamation League (ADL).

²⁴² Antidefamation League (ADL).

²⁴³ Randall L. Bytwerk, “Believing in ‘Inner Truth’: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Nazi Propaganda, 1933–1945,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, no. 2 (August 2015): 212–29, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcv024>.

²⁴⁴ Bytwerk. 214–216, 224.

²⁴⁵ Liliia Sablina, ““We Should Stop the Islamisation of Europe!”: Islamophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism of the Russian-Speaking Internet Users in Germany,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 2 (March 2021): 361–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.76>.

²⁴⁶ Kaan Sahin, “Germany Confronts Russian Hybrid Warfare” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 26, 2017), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/07/26/germany-confronts-russian-hybrid-warfare-pub-72636>.

²⁴⁷ Sablina, “We Should Stop the Islamisation of Europe!”: Islamophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism of the Russian-Speaking Internet Users in Germany. 361.

incident entirely.²⁴⁸ Coordinated media efforts through a variety of Russian-sponsored news outlets (RT, Sputnik, and RT Deutsch) and grass-roots efforts on social media platforms allowed for peer-to-peer distribution of disinformation. This encouraged Russian-German minority groups and neo-Nazis to organize and demonstrate against German authorities, as well as two public statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov denouncing the German police and legal system for submitting to political correctness.²⁴⁹ A “lack of cultural integration among the Russian-speaking population in Germany” is one reason scholars argue that community mobilization occurred so quickly.²⁵⁰ Russians who emigrated and resettled during periods of repatriation tended to do so in clusters, slowing their integration into German society and reinforcing reliance on Russian-based news outlets.²⁵¹ Nevertheless, the Lisa case “had an unarguable influence on the rise of xenophobic attitudes among the Russian-speaking groups in Germany” and “a significant impact on the rising support of the ethnic German settlers for the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).”²⁵² Ethnic Germans from former Soviet nations were encouraged to resettle in Germany, and did so in droves, creating Russian-speaking enclaves in the heart of Europe.²⁵³

E. THE RUSSIAN HISTORICAL CONNECTION

Russia and Germany have a long history which can be characterized as both allied and adversarial.²⁵⁴ Their modern relationship is first defined by the end of World War II, when the Russians defeated Nazi invaders in violation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,

²⁴⁸ Sahin, “Germany Confronts Russian Hybrid Warfare.”

²⁴⁹ Meister, Stefan. “The Lisa Case: Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation.” North American Treaty Organization (NATO). July 25, 2016. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html>

²⁵⁰ Sablina, “We Should Stop the Islamisation of Europe!”: Islamophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism of the Russian-Speaking Internet Users in Germany. 362.

²⁵¹ Sablina, “We Should Stop the Islamisation of Europe!”: Islamophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism of the Russian-Speaking Internet Users in Germany. 362.

²⁵² Sablina, “We Should Stop the Islamisation of Europe!”: Islamophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism of the Russian-Speaking Internet Users in Germany. 362–363.

²⁵³ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 2

²⁵⁴ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 1

and then the Cold War, during which the eastern half of Germany was ceded to indirect Soviet control until the dissolution of East Germany in 1990.²⁵⁵ After the fall of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, bilateral relations between the two nations grew steadily across sectors.²⁵⁶ These cultural connections between Russia and Germany in conjunction with Russia's desire to be included in European affairs weakened the perception of Russia as a threat, but criticisms lingered as Russia failed to democratize and Germany oriented towards Western institutions, such as NATO.²⁵⁷ Vladimir Putin's reelection in 2012 lent legitimacy to concerns about the deteriorating state of Russian democracy.²⁵⁸ Critical of growing autocracy and kleptocracy, Germans were unnerved by Russia's harsh policies against political dissent and criticisms of its democratic neighbors.²⁵⁹ The 2014 invasion of Crimea and President Putin's denunciation of the European nations who did not honor an agreement made with the previous Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, deteriorating official German-Russian cooperation.²⁶⁰ Germany and France assisted in ceasefire and conflict resolution measures through the negotiation of Minsk II between Ukraine and Russia, but the event in itself marked a weakening of Russian-German relations, and even ushered in an era of confrontation, for the foreseeable future.²⁶¹ The modern German government categorizes Russia as a threat to European security, and Russia stops just short of considering many European nations as adversaries.²⁶² Despite their disagreements, Germany maintained communications with Russia until its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.²⁶³

²⁵⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact," accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/German-Soviet-Nonaggression-Pact>

Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 1

²⁵⁶ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 2

²⁵⁷ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 2

²⁵⁸ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 2–3.

²⁵⁹ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 3.

²⁶⁰ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 3.

²⁶¹ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 4.

²⁶² Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 4.

²⁶³ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 4.

F. THE RUSSIAN MEDIA CONNECTION

Considering this history, both Russian and German media are critical of their own government's official policies.²⁶⁴ Germany has a world renowned, robust media environment that promotes a wide variety of perspectives. It takes pride in its ability to function as a “watchdog,” that is, to act as a transparent medium between the public and the government as a public service which both informs the people and holds officials accountable.²⁶⁵ Despite a history of balanced reporting, German media is criticized by Russian outlets for allegedly concealing the truth, and outlets such as RT Deutsch and Sputnik posit themselves as an “alternative source of information, outside the mainstream.”²⁶⁶ These sources portray the German government as an American puppet state led by “Russophobes and Cold War defenders,” contributing to an environment of suspicion and confusion.²⁶⁷ It is here that Russian media and far-right German rhetoric converge, serving mutually beneficial purposes. Russian media outlets feature diplomatic travels of AfD ministers, who use their physical presence in warzones such as Syria, Russian-occupied regions in Ukraine such as Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea, and the Russian-occupied Georgian territories Abkhazia and South Ossetia to attest that any Russian-linked conflict is either not happening or nearly resolved – claims made as conflict involving human rights abuses and acts of war were being actively documented.²⁶⁸ According to Spahn, AfD ministers use Russian sources to legitimize these lies to bolster their political positions at home and support Russia as a nation in ideological alignment with Germany.²⁶⁹ They lobby for rapprochement with Russia in the media and in the

²⁶⁴ Trenin, *Russia And Germany: From Estranged Partners To Good Neighbors*. 5.

²⁶⁵ Esser, Frank, & Michael Brüggermann. “The Strategic Crisis of German Newspapers.” *The Changing Business of Journalism and its Implications for Democracy* (November 2010): 51.

²⁶⁶ Spahn, Susanne. *Russian Media in Germany: How Russian Information Warfare and Disinformation Have Affected Germany*. Potsdam-Babelsberg, Germany: Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit, 2020. <https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/russian-media-in-germany.pdf>, 6.

²⁶⁷ Spahn, *Russian Media in Germany: How Russian Information Warfare and Disinformation Have Affected Germany*. 6–7.

²⁶⁸ Spahn, *Russian Media in Germany: How Russian Information Warfare and Disinformation Have Affected Germany*. 6.

²⁶⁹ Spahn, *Russian Media in Germany: How Russian Information Warfare and Disinformation Have Affected Germany*. 12–15.

Bundestag and promote Russian interests.²⁷⁰ The AfD's function as a megaphone for Russian interests is not only heard in the parliamentary halls, but is conveyed to the public who can be motivated to act.²⁷¹

G. EFFECTS OF ACTIVE MEASURES

It is impossible to discern if statements made by public officials are intended to incite violence unless they specifically state it, and even then, it can be disputed in a court of law.²⁷² This is especially true in the age of social media, where easily digestible pieces of information in a variety of forms (audio, visual, text, or any combination of the three) can be spread rapidly. A sound bite from a speech made by an influential figure, taken in or out of context, can have significant staying power and therefore influence a population who is susceptible to the message.²⁷³ This can and has had the effect of bringing about social change, magnifying societal issues resulting in physical reactions ranging from legal, peaceful protests to violent hate crimes.²⁷⁴

Summarization of AfD doctrine reveals that it is highly opposed to societal and structural change.²⁷⁵ Scholars have theorized that socio-structural correlates (including proportion of foreigners and unemployment rates) exist between far-right support and hate crimes committed in Germany. Data was gathered from the 2016 socio-structural data from the German office for statistics, 2017 federal election results, and over 6,000 reports filed as right-wing motivated hate crimes against refugees between 2015 and 2017. It was compared with a survey covering measures for "cross-group friendships, perceived

²⁷⁰ Spahn, *Russian Media in Germany: How Russian Information Warfare and Disinformation Have Affected Germany*. 15.

²⁷¹ Byman, Daniel L. "How Hateful Rhetoric Connects to Real-World Violence." *Brookings Institute* (blog). April 9, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/09/how-hateful-rhetoric-connects-to-real-world-violence/>

²⁷² Byman, Daniel L. "How Hateful Rhetoric Connects to Real-World Violence."

²⁷³ Byman, Daniel L. "How Hateful Rhetoric Connects to Real-World Violence."

²⁷⁴ Byman, Daniel L. "How Hateful Rhetoric Connects to Real-World Violence."

²⁷⁵ Rees, Jonas H., Yann P.M. Rees, Jens H. Hellman, and Andreas Zick. "Climate of Hate: Similar Correlates of Far Right Electoral Support and Right-Wing Hate Crimes in Germany." <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02328>

Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD). *Manifesto for Germany*.

economic threat, and attitudes towards various political issues including extreme right-wing attitudes” conducted by a professional survey institute.²⁷⁶ After three sets of analyses were conducted, it was determined that “while unrelated to each other, both socio-structural factors were linked with both outcome variables in a systemic fashion.”²⁷⁷ An interesting pattern emerged when analyzing potential effects of geography, the proportion of foreigners was “significantly and positively linked with right-wing crime reported in East Germany,” a pattern which did not emerge in West German municipalities.²⁷⁸ The researchers attributed this to “related but contrary underlying motives: while one seems to be driven by contact-logic (more contact opportunities, less far right electoral support... the other seems to be more in line with group-threat logic (more foreigners, more right wing crime.”²⁷⁹ It is interesting that the patterns diverge along the East and West German cultural lines, and that the presence of foreigners in East Germany is cause enough for an increase in right wing crime; a section of the nation which had previously been controlled by the then-Soviet Union and maintains large enclaves of Russian speakers.

The AfD has taken advantage of social media to become the most followed German political party, placing it in a sort of position of authority in terms of right-wing social media users.²⁸⁰ This has enabled the creation of an echo chamber which may encourage some to commit violent acts.²⁸¹ Empirical research indicates that while social media itself is not the direct cause of violent crime, it can “can act as a propagating mechanism for the flare-up of hateful sentiments.”²⁸² This is substantiated with quantitative data suggesting

²⁷⁶ Rees et al. “Climate of Hate: Similar Correlates of Far Right Electoral Support and Right-Wing Hate Crimes in Germany.”

²⁷⁷ Rees et al. “Climate of Hate: Similar Correlates of Far Right Electoral Support and Right-Wing Hate Crimes in Germany.”

²⁷⁸ Rees et al. “Climate of Hate: Similar Correlates of Far Right Electoral Support and Right-Wing Hate Crimes in Germany.”

²⁷⁹ Rees et al. “Climate of Hate: Similar Correlates of Far Right Electoral Support and Right-Wing Hate Crimes in Germany.”

²⁸⁰ Karsten Müller, and Schwarz, Carlo. *Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime*. Bocconi University, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3082972>, 2–3.

²⁸¹ Müller & Schwarz, *Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime*, 2–3.

²⁸² Müller & Schwarz, *Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime*, 5.

that “exposure to right-wing refugee salience on social media is a predictor of violent attacks on refugees” and correlates Facebook outages with decreases in hate crimes against refugees.²⁸³ This study is limited by its analysis of domestic users and does not address the potential for foreign actors to influence Germany’s domestic political discourse.

Russia has become adept at using Facebook and similar social networking platforms to further their foreign policy objectives to divide democratic societies at a grassroots level. In Germany’s 2017 elections, online AfD supporters received warnings via a Twitter account that appeared to belong to a left-leaning poll worker that their ballots would be made invalid.²⁸⁴ A later tweet stated that the original pollster had been visited by the police and that her position as a poll worker was revoked, and both tweets marked with the hashtag #WahlBetrug (election fraud) went viral, especially amongst far-right users.²⁸⁵ The seriousness of this incident got the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) involved, and their investigation revealed a number of irregularities indicating a fake account.²⁸⁶ The first irregularity was that the profile picture was of Pakistani actress Aiza Khan with a red streak in her otherwise dark hair.²⁸⁷ Second, the account was created in February of 2017, but wasn’t actively posting until August, right before the election.²⁸⁸ A machine scan of the #WahlBetrug hashtag indicated that its traffic (and virality) was not boosted by genuine users, rather, by “a network of automated ‘bot’ accounts which operates largely in Russian, and which @DFRLab previously identified in

²⁸³ Müller & Schwarz, *Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime*, 5, 25.

²⁸⁴ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.” September 23, 2017. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-final-hours-fake-news-hype-in-germany-cc9b8157cfb8>

²⁸⁵ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.”

²⁸⁶ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.”

²⁸⁷ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.”

²⁸⁸ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.”

an [sic] our #ElectionWatch coverage.”²⁸⁹ Many of these “bots” are faceless accounts that have recent creation dates and fewer followers than is believable for creators of viral content.²⁹⁰ Further, their content is much more diverse than just politics – they post “commercial and pornographic content in Russian and English, as well as pro-AfD posts and attacks on Russian anti-corruption campaigner Alexey Navalny.”²⁹¹ However, the sentiment had already been spread by official AfD accounts as well as popular AfD supporters, such as anti-migrant activist Jürgen Elsässer, encouraging followers to do two things: “drag all non-voters and undecideds along, set up car pools and a pick-up/drop off service for old people, the sick, mobility-reduced and fragile people!” and “Take your right to election monitoring seriously, to prove and prevent the greatest election fraud!”²⁹² While not a literal call for violence, put into context, it is possible to envision how a German citizen could read between the lines and consider violence as a measure of election fraud prevention.

H. CONCLUSION

The strength of modern Germany’s democracy is a threat to Russia, which until recently had been a culturally and economically trusted partner. Russia’s perception of Germany to a threat, combined with inside knowledge of its culture and economy, has provided significant baseline knowledge for exploitation through active measures, furthering Russian foreign policy objectives. This has been achieved by preying on long-held societal fissures, most notably the idea of what it means to be German and protecting that identity by making anyone who does not fit that mold into an “other” who can and

²⁸⁹ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.”

²⁹⁰ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.”

²⁹¹ The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. “#ElectionWatch: Final Hours Fake News Hype in Germany.”

²⁹² AfD Kreisverband Saalekreis (@afdkvsaalekreis), “FINALE PHASE – MOBILISIEREN, AKTIVIEREN!” Facebook, September 22, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/afdkvsaalekreis/posts/1478061422230461>

AfD Osnabrück (@AfD.Osnabrueck.AfD), “It’s on Sunday.” Facebook, September 22, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Osnabrueck.AfD/posts/813000875543985>

should be expelled. It is unclear if violence is an intended effect, and this will remain unclear until explicitly stated. However, rises in violence have been correlated with far-right extremism, especially in regions that were under the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. Exposure to right wing ideology via social media, Facebook in particular, was also quantifiably linked to a rise in far-right hate crimes, and social media is a proven medium for modern Russian active measures operations. It is true that correlation does not determine causation, therefore, it cannot be determined that Russia has definitively used active measures to incite violence to further their foreign policy objectives in Germany. However, it can be argued that violence enhances the effects of active measures. Media coverage of violent events highlights the extremes that some are willing to go to, believing that they are protecting their way of life. While it is important for citizens to know and understand the events that are happening around them, it also emphasizes a divided nation. It may encourage distrust even amongst the political middle who were previously unengaged in politics, which is the desired end state of Russian active measures.

IV. THE UNITED STATES

A. BACKGROUND

Despite being a comparatively young nation, the United States can be considered one of the world's oldest modern democracies, and has set and maintained the standard for democratic values since its foundation.²⁹³ Freedom House states that its citizens “benefit from a vibrant political system, a strong rule-of-law tradition, robust freedoms of expression and religious belief, and a wide array of other civil liberties.”²⁹⁴ Despite its world-renowned status as the pinnacle of freedom and democracy, it only scores an 83 out of 100 on the 2022 Freedom House Freedom in the World Index, tying with South Korea and Romania.²⁹⁵ The United States’ score on this index has dropped six points since 2017 as its democratic institutions have eroded with “rising political polarization and extremism, partisan pressure on the electoral process, bias and dysfunction in the criminal justice system, harmful policies on immigration and asylum seekers, and growing disparities in wealth, economic opportunity, and political influence.”²⁹⁶

The United States is dominated by a two-party system in which it is in each party's best interest to align on a single common party line to attract the most voters. If a third party were to emerge, or a significant portion of a major party were to break away, it would weaken the less ideologically aligned party, and the more cohesive party could emerge victorious. A 2021 Pew Research study shows that the current American political environment is highly polarized between and within the two parties by identifying four unique factions on each side of the political spectrum, demonstrating that the American

²⁹³ Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2017, The United States” (Freedom House, January 2017), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2017>.

²⁹⁴ Freedom House, “United States Freedom in the World 2022.”

²⁹⁵ Freedom House, “Freedom House Index 2021.”

²⁹⁶ Freedom House, “United States Freedom in the World 2022.”

political environment is much more nuanced and divided than a two-party system might lead one to believe.²⁹⁷

B. UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT

“Make America Great Again,” or MAGA, a slogan inspired by Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign, was Donald Trump’s tagline in his successful run for presidential office in 2016, eventually becoming the mantra behind the modern conservative movement.²⁹⁸ An interview published in the New York Times revealed Trump’s opinions of American greatness, believing that this peaked at the turn of the 20th century during Theodore Roosevelt’s administration, before its power became “diluted” with weak economic bargaining.²⁹⁹ This opinion was coupled with provocative racial remarks throughout his campaign and presidency, “implying that changing demographics were, in part, to blame for this decline.”³⁰⁰ His hard stances in favor of securing American borders to prevent countries from, as he stated in his campaign launch speech, “sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us” served to identify who was American and who was not, implicitly creating an ingroup needing to protect itself from an outgroup posing an existential threat to his nostalgic representation of the American way of life.³⁰¹ This rhetoric has also loosely united like-minded groups of extremists who have become better organized, often with the help of online platforms, based on extreme anti-government, xenophobic, sexist, and racist ideology.

²⁹⁷ Pew Research Center, “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, November 9, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology-2/>.

²⁹⁸ Anna Maria C. Behler et al., “Making America Great Again? National Nostalgia’s Effect on Outgroup Perceptions,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (April 14, 2021): 555667, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.555667>.

²⁹⁹ David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, “In Donald Trump’s Worldview, American Comes First, and Everyone Else Pays,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy.html?action=Click&contentCollection=BreakingNews&contentID=61307450&pgtype=Homepage&_r=0.

³⁰⁰ Behler et al., “Making America Great Again?”

³⁰¹ Amber Phillips, “‘They’re Rapists.’ President Trump’s Campaign Launch Speech Two Years Later, Annotated,” June 16, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/06/16/theyre-rapists-presidents-trump-campaign-launch-speech-two-years-later-annotated/>.

The Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three Percenters are three of the most well-known groups acting in support of the MAGA ideology. Each group has played a role in many of the politically motivated crimes I will discuss in the next section, and were founded either in response to Barack Obama's election or in support of Donald Trump's.³⁰² Shared amongst the groups is a nostalgic vocabulary associated with the American Revolution and Founding Fathers, likening today's struggles against a tyrannical U.S. government to that of the colonists' treatment by the British during colonial times.³⁰³ Further in common amongst the three is that if racist or xenophobic beliefs are not explicitly stated, they often use "coded rhetoric that also expresses anxiety toward historically disenfranchised racial/ethnic/religious minorities malleable enough to identify additional perceived enemies."³⁰⁴

The Oath Keepers and Three Percenters take a militaristic approach and refer to themselves as the "Citizen's Militia" or the "Unorganized Militia." Relying on the nostalgia of the American revolution, these terms reference the bold action taken by the colonists in declaring independence from Great Britain as one of the great powers of the 18th century.³⁰⁵ They gain their memberships primarily from prior military servicemembers, police, and first responders; all professions which require oaths of service to protect and defend America and her citizens.³⁰⁶ With backgrounds in handling firearms and vehemently protective of the right to bear arms, they claim to be "ever-vigilant, armed,

³⁰² Alejandro Beutel and Daryl Johnson, "The Three Percenters: A Look Inside an Anti-Government Militia" (Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, March 1, 2021), <https://newlinesinstitute.org/far-right-extremism/the-three-percenters-a-look-inside-an-anti-government-militia/>; Michael Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, "Proud Boys Crimes and Characteristics January 2022" (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, January 2022), <https://start.umd.edu/publication/proud-boys-crimes-and-characteristics>.

³⁰³ Alejandro Beutel and Daryl Johnson, "The Three Percenters: A Look Inside an Anti-Government Militia"; Michael Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, "Proud Boys Crimes and Characteristics January 2022."

³⁰⁴ Alejandro Beutel and Daryl Johnson, "The Three Percenters: A Look Inside an Anti-Government Militia."

³⁰⁵ Alejandro Beutel and Daryl Johnson.

³⁰⁶ Eric McQueen, "Examining Extremism: The Oath Keepers" (Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), June 17, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-oath-keepers>.

trained, and ready at a moment's notice to mobilize against today's tyrants in waiting."³⁰⁷ The U.S. government is the primary "tyrant," but the narrative can be adjusted to fit any person or group perceived to be a threat; currently, those include but are not limited to antifascists (ANTIFA), Black Lives Matter, George Soros (the person – his name is used to symbolize Jewish people), and Muslims.³⁰⁸

The Proud Boys were founded in 2016 by Vice Media cofounder Gavin McInnis and are described as "Western chauvinists who romanticize a traditional, male-dominated version of Western culture," but deny their deep roots in "white nationalism and ideology."³⁰⁹ While fewer Proud Boys members have a background in armed services (including military and police), eighty-three members of the Proud Boys, or their sympathizers, have committed crimes in the U.S., and 54 have been charged with participating in the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol.³¹⁰ In 2021, Proud Boy defendants were charged with more crimes than ever in the group's history, including 30 violent crimes and nearly 30 non-violent crimes.³¹¹

C. FAR-RIGHT POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES AND GOVERNMENT REACTIONS

In December 2016, 28-year-old Edgar Maddison Welch of Salisbury, North Carolina, approached Comet Ping Pong, a Washington, D.C. pizza parlor, armed with an AR-15 assault rifle; he was inspired by accusations that Bill and Hillary Clinton were operating a pedophile ring out of its basement.³¹² Welch tried to open a locked door with

³⁰⁷ Alejandro Beutel and Daryl Johnson, "The Three Percenters: A Look Inside an Anti-Government Militia."

³⁰⁸ Alejandro Beutel and Daryl Johnson.

³⁰⁹ Michael Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane, "Proud Boys Crimes and Characteristics January 2022."

³¹⁰ Michael Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane.

³¹¹ Michael Jensen, Elizabeth Yates, and Sheehan Kane.

³¹² Kate Samuelson, "What to Know about Pizzagate, the Fake News Story with Real Consequences," *Time*, December 5, 2016, <https://time.com/4590255/pizzagate-fake-news-what-to-know/>.

a butter knife before shooting into it with his firearm.³¹³ After occupying the business alone for over 20 minutes in an armed standoff with police, Welch surrendered and was eventually sentenced to four years in prison and ordered to pay over \$5,000 in restitution.³¹⁴ The information he, and many others, used to come to this conclusion came from the internet message board 4chan, a site known for harboring and perpetuating conspiracy theories and extremist viewpoints; this conspiracy sub-theory, now known as Pizzagate, contributed to a larger theory that Democratic leaders, among others, maintain control of the nation through a deep state cabal.³¹⁵ The owner of the restaurant and donor to the Democratic Party, James Alefantis, was mentioned in a string of emails released by Wikileaks earlier in 2016.³¹⁶ These emails were analyzed and allegedly decoded by the 4chan community, who determined that words such as “cheese” and “pizza” were code for pedophilic activity when collated with Alefantis’ personal social media activity.³¹⁷ As the conspiracy theory grew, Alefantis began to receive threats against himself and his business, both in person and online.³¹⁸ Welch acted as a lone wolf in this instance, though he was backed by a community known for its extremist viewpoints and rhetoric which indicated that the group, or an individual within it, would be willing to act on perceived threats to a vulnerable population.³¹⁹ This incident would not be the first, last, or only act of its kind, and would escalate.

During the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, incumbent Donald Trump insisted that the only way he would lose was if the election was stolen from him; this narrative intensified when the results, confirmed by “election officials, judges and justices and

³¹³ United States Department of Justice, “North Carolina Man Sentenced to Four-Year Prison Term For Armed Assault at Northwest Washington Pizza Restaurant” (United States Department of Justice (DOJ), June 22, 2017), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/north-carolina-man-sentenced-four-year-prison-term-armed-assault-northwest-washington>.

³¹⁴ United States Department of Justice.

³¹⁵ Kate Samuelson, “What to Know about Pizzagate, the Fake News Story with Real Consequences.”

³¹⁶ Kate Samuelson.

³¹⁷ Kate Samuelson.

³¹⁸ Kate Samuelson.

³¹⁹ Kate Samuelson.

Trump’s own officials in the departments of Justice and Homeland Security that the Nov. 3 election was cleanly run and fairly counted,” determined that he would not serve a second term.³²⁰ Donald Trump addressed his supporters at 12:01 p.m. at the “Save America” rally which took place at The Ellipse, calling on Vice President Mike Pence to “reject Biden’s win and send the votes back to the states,” and encouraging rally attendees to march to Capitol Hill in protest of the vote certification.³²¹ Just over an hour later, rally attendees overpowered the undermanned Capitol police force on the back side of the building by shattering windows and unlocking doors to let others in.³²² By 3 p.m., rioters entered the Senate Chamber, lawmakers’ offices and the Speaker’s Lobby where congressional members were sheltering; some carried firearms and others used their phones to take selfies.³²³ On the front steps of the Capitol, rioters wearing clothing and waving flags with far right imagery and slogans, such as America First, Pepe the Frog, the ‘Kekistan’ flag, and the “Day of the Rope” noose which alludes to a “fictional insurrection described in a 1978 novel written by prominent whites supremacist William Luther Pierce.”³²⁴ Donald Trump watched the events unfold in his private dining room near the Oval Office, and did not address the situation until just after 4 p.m.; four hours later, the Senate reopened and the votes were ultimately confirmed at close to 4 a.m. on the morning of January 7.³²⁵

³²⁰ Calvin Woodward, “AP Fact Check: Trump’s False Claims, Fuel on a Day of Chaos,” *The Associated Press*, January 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-fact-check-donald-trump-a98d72c0ccde16fa900e6053a4599cab>.

³²¹ Lisa Mascaro et al., “Pro-Trump Mob Storms U.S. Capitol in Bid to Overturn Election,” *Associated Press News*, January 6, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/congress-confirm-joe-biden-78104aea082995bbd7412a6e6cd13818>.

³²² Mascaro et al.; Kat Lonsdorf et al., “A Timeline of How the Jan. 6 Attack Unfolded - Including Who Said What and When,” *National Public Radio (NPR)*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/05/1069977469/a-timeline-of-how-the-jan-6-attack-unfolded-including-who-said-what-and-when>.

³²³ Kat Lonsdorf et al., “A Timeline of How the Jan. 6 Attack Unfolded - Including Who Said What and When.”

³²⁴ Mascaro et al., “Pro-Trump Mob Storms U.S. Capitol in Bid to Overturn Election”; Kat Lonsdorf et al., “A Timeline of How the Jan. 6 Attack Unfolded - Including Who Said What and When”; Washington Post Staff, “Identifying Far-Right Symbols That Appeared at the U.S. Capitol Riot,” *Washington Post*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/far-right-symbols-capitol-riot/>.

³²⁵ Mascaro et al., “Pro-Trump Mob Storms U.S. Capitol in Bid to Overturn Election”; Kat Lonsdorf et al., “A Timeline of How the Jan. 6 Attack Unfolded - Including Who Said What and When.”

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, dozens of threat reports were created from open source data to warn of the events of January 6; specific warnings included “potential for violence between opposing groups... groups or individuals may be armed...groups or individuals may use improvised weapons... extremist groups may commit or incite violence... groups may attack the Capitol or Congress.”³²⁶ This lends credibility to the scholarly assertion that white nationalist groups known for supporting Trump “used the rally as a cover, came prepared to enact violence and insurrection” against a government they perceived to be assuming power illegally.³²⁷ Four people died on the day of the insurrection, and five police officers who served at the Capitol on January 6 died afterwards – four of the five police officer deaths were by suicide.³²⁸

D. ACTIVE MEASURES

The existing cleavages of American culture – race, culture, and political beliefs, being a few – provide ideal conditions for the Kremlin to conduct an active measures campaign against its greatest perceived threat. Putin has long viewed the U.S. as the primary threat to his regime because of its position as a great power, as a democracy, and the support it is able to provide to nations aspiring to become or maintain their own democracies – some of which lie in Russia’s desired sphere of influence.³²⁹ Exploiting vulnerabilities through societal differences within the U.S. has proven to be an effective tactic in the effort to degrade one of the oldest democracies in the modern world.

³²⁶ Government Accountability Office, “Capitol Attack: Federal Agencies’ Use of Open Source Data and Related Threat Products Prior to January 6, 2021” (Government Accountability Office, May 2, 2022), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105963>.

³²⁷ Alejandro Beutel and Daryl Johnson, “The Three Percenters: A Look Inside an Anti-Government Militia.”

³²⁸ Chris Cameron, “These Are the People Who Died in Connection with the Capitol Riot,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-deaths.html>.

³²⁹ Marlene Laruelle and Jean Radvanyi, *Understanding Russia: The Challenges of Transformation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). 122–124.

An early, long-term operation attributed to Russia is the 2016 hack and leak of the 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC) staff emails and election research data.³³⁰ Russia's calculated activities to gain access to such materials were conducted by its Internet Research Agency (IRA), going back as far as 2014, when hackers probed for general vulnerabilities in the United States and the election process.³³¹ Russian involvement climaxes with the June 2016 launch of website DCLeaks, along with Twitter and Facebook pages to complement, which published "material allegedly stolen by the hackers including emails, DNC files and information stolen from Republicans in 2015."³³² Wikileaks, along with then-candidate Donald Trump, amplified the release, making it a popular subject of scrutiny on message board sites such as 4chan, providing a basis for violent action such as Edgar Maddison Welch at Comet Ping Pong.³³³ Twelve Russian officials were indicted in the U.S. in connection with the operation. A 2017 report by the Director of National Intelligence assessed that the influence campaign was ordered by President Putin, with the goal of promoting candidate Trump and denigrating candidate Clinton.³³⁴ This also marked the first time the U.S. made direct accusations that Russia was involved in influencing American elections, leading to increased criticism of the sources of alternative or extremist information which energized anti-government conspiracy theorists.³³⁵

QAnon is a grassroots movement, largely crowdsourced online, based on the assumptions that the U.S. is and has been ruled by "a cabal of Satan-worshipping Democratic politicians and Hollywood celebrities" that "are running a global child sex-

³³⁰ Phillip Bump, "Timeline: How Russian Agents Allegedly Hacked the DNC and Clinton's Campaign," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/07/13/timeline-how-russian-agents-allegedly-hacked-the-dnc-and-clintons-campaign/>.

³³¹ Phillip Bump.

³³² Phillip Bump.

³³³ Phillip Bump.

³³⁴ Phillip Bump; Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections," January 6, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

³³⁵ Phillip Bump, "Timeline: How Russian Agents Allegedly Hacked the DNC and Clinton's Campaign."

trafficking ring.”³³⁶ A 2021 PRRI study found that 15% of Americans, nearly fifty million people, agree with these allegations.³³⁷ 23% of those in agreement identify as Republican.³³⁸ QAnon believers reject the current world order as the primary threat actors are “embedded in influential positions in government, media, finance, and the arts,” and that Donald Trump was the individual who would “expose and dismantle these networks.”³³⁹ Preying on long-held religious, political, and security-related fears, the conspiracy grows as additional theories are incorporated, resulting in a highly adaptable decentralized organization. As events (both domestic and international) occur, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, theories are co-opted, and previous assumptions are re-interpreted. The movement is fueled with online posts “dropped” by Q, an unknown individual with purported knowledge of high-level military intelligence acting on behalf of the people to inform them of information which the current government is keeping from them.³⁴⁰ These “Qdrops,” often laden with anti-Semitic references depicting influential individuals as “Satan-worshipping ‘puppet masters’ who fund efforts to create a new world order,” promote the idea of ‘thinking for oneself’ by following the dropped clues, pushing believers into ideas which promote anti-institutional and anti-government sentiments which coincide with Russia’s active measures purposes.³⁴¹

³³⁶ Michael A. Jensen and Sheehan Kane, “QAnon-Inspired Violence in the United States: An Empirical Assessment of a Misunderstood Threat,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, December 14, 2021, 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2021.2013292>. 3.

³³⁷ PRRI, “Understanding QAnon’s Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption” (PRRI, May 27, 2021), <https://www.prri.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>.

³³⁸ PRRI.

³³⁹ Melanie Smith, “Interpreting Social Qs: Implications of the Evolution of QAnon” (Graphika, August 2021), <https://graphika.com/reports/interpreting-social-qs-implications-of-the-evolution-of-qanon/>.

³⁴⁰ The Soufan Center, “Quantifying the Q Conspiracy: A Data Driven Approach to Understanding the Threat Posed by QAnon” (The Soufan Center, April 19, 2021), <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/quantifying-the-q-conspiracy-a-data-driven-approach-to-understanding-the-threat-posed-by-qanon/>. According to the Antidefamation League, “Q” actually stands for the Department of Energy security clearance, i.e. “An employee with a Q sensitive clearance could have access to nuclear weapons design, manufacture, or use data; disclosure could cause exceptionally grave damage to the nation.” Source: <https://www.adl.org/qanon>

³⁴¹ The Soufan Center.

The digital and fluid nature of QAnon provides foreign actors ample opportunities to quickly amplify or interject their own information and/or disinformation. It also presents a reciprocal opportunity for data analysts, using publicly available Twitter datasets, to monitor activity by mainstream media outlets publicly funded by Russia, such as RT and Sputnik, and Russian-attributed actors, such as the IRA, and investigate the relationships between the two.³⁴² A Graphika study found that “Russia may have taken a concerted interest in QAnon between December 2017 and April 2018” by analyzing the use of hashtags #QAnon and #WWG1WGA (acronym for “Where We Go One, We Go All,” QAnon’s slogan).³⁴³ In 2018, Twitter removed accounts associated with Russian information operations, resulting in a significant decrease in activity related to use of the aforementioned hashtags.³⁴⁴

A study published by The Soufan Center found that in 2020 and 2021, an average of nearly 20% of QAnon-categorized posts on Facebook were influenced by foreign actors, with noticeable peaks correlating with domestic events like the Wayfair Incident, which “stipulated that the online furniture retailer was engaged in wide-scale child sex trafficking,” presidential election, and the COVID-19 outbreak.³⁴⁵ While recognizing that Russia is “often considered the most capable and sophisticated driver of disinformation,” analysts actually found that China was also taking a proactive role in amplifying the disinformation environment through QAnon.³⁴⁶ Russia and China contributed nearly equally in 2020, with Chinese activity spiking around March with the reactions to the spread of “COVID-19, human rights abuses, and other areas of contention.”³⁴⁷

³⁴² Melanie Smith, “Interpreting Social Qs: Implications of the Evolution of QAnon”; “Quantifying the Q Conspiracy: A Data Driven Approach to Understanding the Threat Posed by QAnon.”

³⁴³ Melanie Smith, “Interpreting Social Qs: Implications of the Evolution of QAnon.”

³⁴⁴ Melanie Smith.

³⁴⁵ The Soufan Center, “Quantifying the Q Conspiracy: A Data Driven Approach to Understanding the Threat Posed by QAnon.” 13, 25–26.

³⁴⁶ The Soufan Center. 26.

³⁴⁷ The Soufan Center. 26.

E. THE RUSSIAN CULTURAL CONNECTION

The Russian Imperial Movement, also known as RIM, was established in 2002 as an “extreme-right, white supremacist militant organization based in St. Petersburg, Russia” which “promotes ethnic Russian nationalism, advocates for the restoration of Russia’s tsarist regime, and seeks to fuel white supremacy extremism in the West.”³⁴⁸ Initially, RIM was focused on domestic Russian politics, aligning itself with the Russian orthodox church and ‘valor-based’ militaristic ideology as it developed amongst other fringe-right groups in Russia.³⁴⁹ RIM slowly made connections with other Russian organizations that aligned with its principles, including anti-immigration and pro-Russian nationalist groups (some of which would fragment to become political parties in Russia) before expanding beyond territorial borders and into Ukraine in 2014.³⁵⁰ In 2015, RIM cofounded the World National Conservative Movement (WNCM) with Russia’s conservative Rodina party, providing a network of international extreme-right groups that oppose “pluralism, tolerance, and other liberal values.”³⁵¹ In 2017, RIM went beyond a support network and offered paramilitary training to individuals organizing the “Unite the Right” rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017.³⁵² Though this invitation was flatly denied by both sides, RIM members visited Washington, D.C in September of 2017 posing with a Russian imperial flag in front of the American capitol building in what is claimed to be the first meeting between Russian and American far right groups.³⁵³ In April of 2020, the U.S. State Department named RIM leaders as “Specially Designated Global Terrorists” under Executive Order 13224, a designation the members consider to be validating them as a

³⁴⁸ Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University, “Russian Imperial Movement” (Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University, May 23, 2022), https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement#highlight_text_22723.

³⁴⁹ Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University.

³⁵⁰ Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University.

³⁵¹ Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University.

³⁵² Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University.

³⁵³ Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), Stanford University.

threat against Western culture: one of the members called it “a reward” in a social media post following the official designation.³⁵⁴

F. THE RUSSIAN MEDIA CONNECTION

Russia’s exploitation of social media platforms demonstrates the Kremlin’s ability to take advantage of the shifting media environment in the U.S. A 2020 Pew Research study found that Americans, especially those 50 and younger, are replacing print, television, and radio sources with digital ones, such as computers, tablets, and smartphones.³⁵⁵ Americans over 50 years of age still rely on both TV and digital sources, while those 18–29 depend more heavily on computers, tablets, and smartphones than other mediums.³⁵⁶ Manipulation of the media plays a large role in Russia’s disinformation tactics, which the U.S. Department of State’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) defines with five pillars: official government communication, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation.³⁵⁷ This is a modernized approach to active measures as each pillar can be used to amplify the others, creating a more believable narrative to weaken democracy and strengthen perceptions of Russia by comparison.³⁵⁸ Russia has been able to influence Americans in three ways: the establishment of American versions of Kremlin-sponsored networks RT and Sputnik, propagation of pro-Russian narratives in polarized mainstream American networks, and the manipulation of social media networks and their algorithms.

³⁵⁴ Robyn Dixon, “Inside White-Supremacist Russian Imperial Movement, Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization by U.S. State Department,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-white-supremacist-terrorism-us/2020/04/11/255a9762-7a75-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html.

³⁵⁵ Elisa Shearer, “More than Eight-in-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices” (Pew Research Center, January 12, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

³⁵⁶ Elisa Shearer.

³⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem” (U.S. Department of State, January 20, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/report-rt-and-sputniks-role-in-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-ecosystem/>.
13.

³⁵⁸ U.S. Department of State.

The debuts of RT America and Sputnik in the United States, which have publicly been touted by Russian government officials as tools for its propaganda campaigns, give Russian policy an American voice with the intent to “Question More.”³⁵⁹ These networks liken themselves to publicly funded, transparent outlets such as British Broadcasting Network (BBC) and Voice of America, but their “opaque organizational structure and lack of financial transparency obscure the true extent of the Russian government’s control over the outlets’ editorial processes and staffing decisions.”³⁶⁰ Part of RT America’s strategy was to hire native journalists with some amount of recognition to support the organization’s legitimacy.³⁶¹ This resulted in a mixed bag of experienced journalists, such as former MSNBC host Ed Schultz who had been released from the network due to controversial claims and low ratings, and new journalists trying to establish themselves.³⁶² Margarita Simonyan, the Editor-In-Chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya (Sputnik’s parent company) admitted in a 2013 interview that information is a weapon to be used in a critical moment, such as war, and that news audiences are accrued to be politically exploited.³⁶³ By 2017, RT had a weekly audience of 11 million Americans with a majority of its coverage focused on the criticism of three topics: American democratic allies, U.S. domestic conditions, and U.S. foreign policy.³⁶⁴ In January of the same year, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence recognized the influence RT America was trying to exert over the American population by highlighting “criticism of alleged U.S. shortcomings in democracy and civil liberties.”³⁶⁵ By August, the Department of Justice demanded that RT America register as

³⁵⁹ U.S. Department of State. 13.

³⁶⁰ U.S. Department of State. 3.

³⁶¹ Kaitlyn Tiffany, “RT America, You Were Very Weird and Bad,” *The Atlantic*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/03/russia-today-propaganda-shut-down/627606/>.

³⁶² Kaitlyn Tiffany.

³⁶³ U.S. Department of State, “Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem.”

³⁶⁴ Erin Baggott Carter and Brett L. Carter, “Questioning More: RT, Outward-Facing Propaganda, and the Post-West World Order,” *Security Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 49–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2021.1885730>. 51.

³⁶⁵ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Background to ‘Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections’: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution” (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 6, 2017), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

a foreign agent, and in the process lost its congressional press credentials and some of its cable deals. In March of 2022, Russian outlets, including RT, were banned from American and other Western networks to diminish the spread of propaganda supporting Putin's invasion of Ukraine.³⁶⁶

Russia's inability to maintain an overt presence in American news has not necessarily held back its ability to propagate its message to Americans. Fox News is the most watched cable news network on television with programs such as Tucker Carlson Tonight garnering over three million viewers weekly in January of 2022.³⁶⁷ Conservative commentators have echoed Kremlin propaganda regarding its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, defending Russia's actions as self-defense, and have severely criticized the U.S. and NATO's role regarding the conflict.³⁶⁸ A leaked memo from the Russian Department of Information and Telecommunications Support revealed that President Putin provided Russian journalists with talking points supportive of the Russian agenda, and requested the use of clips from Carlson's nightly Fox News broadcast which criticize the West and support Russia.³⁶⁹ In this way, conservative American and Russian media have been able to coexist, using one another to emphasize pro-Russian, anti-Western viewpoints.

The prevalence of social media as a space to discuss and share ideas has given the Kremlin another avenue into American thought and cultural discourse. It has become an ideal environment for Russia to influence Americans by combining covert cyber operations with overt Russian government efforts, as was the case with the 2016 Presidential election

³⁶⁶ Rebecca Alter, "RT America Shuts Down Amid Russian State-Media Bans," *The New Yorker*, *Vulture*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.vulture.com/2022/03/youtube-tiktok-meta-block-russia-owned-rt.html?regwall-newsletter-signup=true>.

³⁶⁷ Mark Joyella, "Fox News Makes Gains In 1Q Cable News Ratings While CNN, MSNBC Suffer Steep Declines," *Forbes*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2022/03/29/fox-news-makes-gains-in-1q-cable-news-ratings-while-cnn-msnbc-suffer-steep-declines/?sh=6bef8d669353>.

³⁶⁸ Sheera Frenkel and Stuart A. Thompson, "How Russia and Right-Wing Americans Converged on War in Ukraine," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/technology/russia-american-far-right-ukraine.html>; David Corn, "Leaked Kremlin Memo to Russian Media: It Is 'Essential' to Feature Tucker Carlson," *Mother Jones*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2022/03/exclusive-kremlin-putin-russia-ukraine-war-memo-tucker-carlson-fox/>.

³⁶⁹ David Corn, "Leaked Kremlin Memo to Russian Media: It Is 'Essential' to Feature Tucker Carlson."

interference.³⁷⁰ Extremists in the United States have also embraced social media as a viable ecosystem for spreading ideology and creating peer-to-peer connections; studies have suggested that access to social media has “contributed to the acceleration of radicalization of U.S. extremists.”³⁷¹ Leveraging anonymity, allowing Russian actors to push a Russian agenda and promote radicalization of extremists, is just one of the problems that social media companies have yet to solve. In an investigation completed in support of an indictment prepared by Special Counsel Robert Mueller in 2018, it was revealed that Russia exploited anonymity with the creation of thousands of “bot” profiles designed to automatically push information.³⁷² These bots propagated thousands of pieces of Russian-created content and exposed it to millions of Americans on Facebook.³⁷³ Another exploited weakness was the reliance of social media companies on advertisements for revenue; Russia was discovered to have purchased thousands of advertisements on Facebook, which were shown to millions of users.³⁷⁴ Capturing a social media user’s attention by purchasing advertising space allows for easy amplification of pro-Russian messages, such as rhetoric which justifies Russian military action against the democratic Ukrainian government and decries Western efforts to support Ukraine’s sovereignty.³⁷⁵ Exposure, however, does not necessarily equate to action, and it is not currently possible to draw a clear line from Russian propaganda to violent activity.

³⁷⁰ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Background to ‘Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections’: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution.”

³⁷¹ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, “The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists” (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, July 2018), https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_UseOfSocialMediaByUSExtremists_ResearchBrief_July2018.pdf. 1.

³⁷² U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, “Exposing Russia’s Effort to Sow Discord Online: The Internet Research Agency and Advertisements” (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, February 2018), <https://intelligence.house.gov/social-media-content/>.

³⁷³ U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

³⁷⁴ U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

³⁷⁵ Sheera Frenkel and Stuart A. Thompson, “How Russia and Right-Wing Americans Converged on War in Ukraine.”

G. EFFECTS OF ACTIVE MEASURES

Russia, in both its current incarnation and during the Soviet era, has conducted effective active measures campaigns, leveraging technological advances highly adapted to American society. Disinformation about the origins of the AIDS virus and accusations that children's organs were being trafficked in the United States (resulting in the suspension of some bilateral foreign adoption agreements) was effective in the 1980s despite being publicly debunked.³⁷⁶ Stories which took advantage of existing cleavages in race, gender, and sexual identity and the instinctual desire to protect children as the most vulnerable subset of the population appeared in the most consumed media of their time – television news and newspapers.³⁷⁷ Today, disinformation typically manifests on the internet, with social media as the medium of choice.

As the QAnon movement gained support from Americans and incorporated new theories, Russia became more involved in its dissemination.³⁷⁸ In 2019, Twitter removed accounts which sent high volumes of tweets containing QAnon-related hashtags as they were suspected of being created by Russia's IRA.³⁷⁹ In 2020, RT and Sputnik spread disinformation about Hillary Clinton being arrested, Hollywood elites trafficking children, and COVID-19 – all topics of high importance amongst QAnon believers.³⁸⁰ Between 2016 and 2021, over 100 QAnon supporters committed “ideologically motivated crimes” resulting in 46 criminal acts across 21 states, including Pizzagate and the January 6 insurrection.³⁸¹ The more visible the movement becomes, through violent action and

³⁷⁶ The New York Times, *Operation InfeKtion: How Russia Perfected the Art of War*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR_6dibpDfo; Christina Nemr and William Gangwire, “Weapons of Mass Distraction.”

³⁷⁷ The New York Times, *Operation InfeKtion: How Russia Perfected the Art of War*; Christina Nemr and William Gangwire, “Weapons of Mass Distraction.”

³⁷⁸ Joseph Menn, “Russian-Backed Organizations Amplify QAnon Conspiracy Theories, Researchers Say,” *Reuters*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-qanon-russia/russian-backed-organizations-amplifying-qanon-conspiracy-theories-researchers-say-idUSKBN25K13T>.

³⁷⁹ Joseph Menn.

³⁸⁰ Joseph Menn.

³⁸¹ Jensen and Kane, “QAnon-Inspired Violence in the United States: An Empirical Assessment of a Misunderstood Threat.” 5.

availability of information, the more QAnon-related crimes occur.³⁸² The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced this growth, as individuals reluctantly under quarantine surveyed conspiracy theories online.³⁸³ The eighteen year old responsible for the May 14, 2022 shooting of a grocery store in Buffalo, just one of over 200 mass shootings committed in the United States in 2022, admitted to exploring extremist forums on the message site 4chan out of boredom during the pandemic.³⁸⁴ Despite Russia's interest in spreading QAnon propaganda, there is no evidence available to connect Russia to the violence committed by Americans who subscribe to QAnon theories.

H. CONCLUSION

There are a number of persistent schisms in American society which Russia has monitored and exploited for decades. Today's fissures are not novel, but the methods and depths to which they have been revealed and exploited are. The internet has created the ideal conditions for Russia to develop a more thorough understanding of American minds both individually and holistically. Modern tools make it possible for a Russian to impersonate an American several times over with the creation of fake accounts and use those accounts to further provoke anti-government ideology, a tactic in line with desired active measures end states.

All of this being analyzed, the claim that Russian active measures incite violence in the United States cannot be unequivocally supported. The correlation between the two is visible, but the effects are second order at best. Without an outright declaration from the Russian government, it is impossible to know if its intention was to instigate violence to bolster its own position that even though the Russian system might not be perfect, it's not suffering from nearly 200 mass shootings in just under six months like the United States is.

³⁸² Jensen and Kane. 6–7.

³⁸³ Jensen and Kane. 7.

³⁸⁴ David Folkenflik and Domenico Montanaro, "What the Shooting in Buffalo Has to Do with Fox News Host Tucker Carlson," *National Public Radio (NPR)*, May 17, 2022, sec. Media, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/17/1099587491/what-the-shooting-in-buffalo-has-to-do-with-fox-news-host-tucker-carlson>.

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V. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

In March of 2014, Russian troops invaded Crimea, territory then held by Ukraine. was supported by active measures conducting a cyber-attack disabling Ukrainian telecommunications and disinformation campaigns discrediting the Ukrainian government with the invasion of Russian troops into Crimea.³⁸⁵ Using strategic communications targeting pro-Russian separatists, the Kremlin promoted a narrative that the government of Ukraine was fascist and anti-Russian, and that Russia would improve quality of life for the Crimean population.³⁸⁶ Overt television broadcasts and covert exploitation of the anonymous nature of the internet allowed Russian propaganda to spread, distorting the information environment and clouding Russia's intentions.³⁸⁷ This confusion may have prevented Ukraine and its allies and partners from anticipating and intervening against Russia, and the Crimean Parliament approved a referendum to join Russia.³⁸⁸ In 2022, Russia attempted to use such tactics again when invading Ukraine in a multi-pronged attack designed to quickly capture Kyiv, overthrow the democratic government, and appropriate its territory.³⁸⁹ Russia's 2022 efforts in the kinetic and information realms have been less effective when compared to those of 2014, potentially due to Ukraine and the West's familiarity with Russian tactics and the development of more effective measures in countering it.

At the time of writing, Russia's initial objective of taking the capital has not been achieved as Ukraine successfully held off invading forces with support from many Western

³⁸⁵ Emilio J. Iasiello, *From Georgia to Crimea*, vol. 10.01, 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-09/pC_V10N1_en_Iasiello.pdf.

³⁸⁶ Iasiello.

³⁸⁷ Iasiello.

³⁸⁸ Iasiello.

³⁸⁹ Steven Pifer, "The Russia-Ukraine War at Three Months," *Order from Chaos* (blog), May 23, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/23/the-russia-ukraine-war-at-three-months/>.

countries..³⁹⁰ Democratic nations, such as France, Germany, and the United States, reacted swiftly to Russia's attempted takeover, imposing severe economic sanctions just days after the invasion reducing ability to finance a war denounced by the U.S. and over 30 allies and partner nations.³⁹¹

Despite these collective efforts, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has sharply criticized France and Germany, as the leaders of Europe, for not endorsing Ukraine's entry into NATO in 2008, and the U.S. for not doing more to support Ukraine.³⁹² In France, Marine Le Pen, the far-right candidate who is often criticized for her financial ties to Russia and public support of Putin's actions, narrowly lost the presidency to Emmanuel Macron, who has sought to strengthen France by collectively strengthening Europe. Macron has since played a large role in diplomacy with Russia, which has also been highly scrutinized.³⁹³ Germany has been criticized for its dependence on Russian gas and reluctance to quickly sever it, effectually subsidizing Russian war efforts.³⁹⁴ The U.S. has supported Ukraine with military weapons and intelligence support, and opposed Russia diplomatically, plunging U.S.-Russia relations to lows not seen since the Cold War.³⁹⁵

Russia has used the disinformation element of active measure campaigns to supplement its military efforts, both prior to the invasion and during the subsequent conflict. First claiming that the buildup of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border with Belarus and Russia was for a joint exercise, not staging for an invasion. Then, after ordering

³⁹⁰ Steven Pifer; Jordan Cohen, "Ukraine Received Weapons Support from Around the World," *The Conversation* (blog), May 6, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-receives-weapons-support-from-around-the-world-182266>.

³⁹¹ The White House, "FACT SHEET: United States, G7 and EU Impose Severe and Immediate Costs on Russia" (Washington, D.C.: The White House, April 6, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/06/fact-sheet-united-states-g7-and-eu-impose-severe-and-immediate-costs-on-russia/>.

³⁹² Benjamin Dodman, "'Wrong about Putin': Did Germany and France Turn a Blind Eye to the Threat from Russia?," *France 24*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220405-wrong-about-putin-did-germany-and-france-turn-blind-eye-to-threat-from-russia>.

³⁹³ Dodman.

³⁹⁴ Dodman.

³⁹⁵ Jennifer Hansler, "Putin's War on Ukraine Has 'driven US-Russia Relations into the Depths,' U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Says," *CNN*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/28/politics/us-ambassador-russia-sullivan-cnntv/index.html>.

Russian troops onto Ukrainian soil, President Putin stated the “special military operation” was in defense of Russia and ethnic Russians from alleged persecution, blaming Ukraine and the West.³⁹⁶ None of the justifications provided have held up to global scrutiny; the West, and especially President Zelenskyy, has been remarkably successful in addressing the public with facts.³⁹⁷ Ukrainians have documented and disseminated evidence of the atrocities occurring at the hands of Russian soldiers, and intelligence agencies have been more transparent than ever before, again using facts to undercut Russia’s fabrications.³⁹⁸ The same tool that Russia has used to spread its propaganda is now being used to discredit it, as exposing the truth - verified by civilian open source researchers - has now become more effective than spreading lies.³⁹⁹ This has been an effective tactic for Ukraine and the West as corporations cut ties with Russia, philanthropists and humanitarian organizations rush to Ukraine’s aid, and social media platforms now actively seek to identify and remove accounts pushing a pro-Russian narrative.⁴⁰⁰

France, Germany, and the United States are among the nations which vocally support Ukrainian sovereignty and have continuously called for Russia to cease its unprovoked belligerence, declaring it to be a violation of the United Nations treaty.⁴⁰¹ Moscow has perceived NATO enlargement as a threat, and its invasion of Ukraine has only catalyzed NATO growth as nations such as Finland and Sweden expedite their applications to join.⁴⁰² Though the outcome is uncertain, Ukraine may remain an independent nation

³⁹⁶ Office of the Spokesperson, “Fact vs. Fiction: Russian Disinformation on Ukraine” (U.S. Department of State, January 20, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/fact-vs-fiction-russian-disinformation-on-ukraine/>.

³⁹⁷ Jamie Dettmer, “Russia’s Disinformation Playbook Ripped Apart,” *Voice of America*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-disinformation-playbook-ripped-apart/6486203.html>.

³⁹⁸ Dettmer.

³⁹⁹ Dettmer.

⁴⁰⁰ Dettmer.

⁴⁰¹ French Foreign Ministry, “Statement on Russia’s War against Ukraine” (French Foreign Ministry, May 14, 2022), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/development-assistance/news/90-2022/article/statement-on-russia-s-war-against-ukraine-g7-foreign-ministers-14-may-2022>.

⁴⁰² NATO, “Finland and Sweden Submit Applications to Join NATO,” May 18, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm.

with most of its sovereignty intact.⁴⁰³ Ukrainians have even returning to Kyiv after fleeing in fear months ago, signaling that life is beginning to return to some state of normalcy.⁴⁰⁴

B. DISCUSSION

Through the case studies of France, Germany, and the United States, I have sought to answer the following questions: considering Russia's refined ability to spread believable disinformation through active measures campaigns and the desire to prove democracy's inferiority, is it possible that Russia has focused its active measures to inspire right-wing extremist movements in France, the United States, and Germany? If so, have these campaigns intentionally shifted action from digital to kinetic in the form of domestic terrorism?

Research has demonstrated that right wing violence is occurring with varying levels of severity. Far-right and nationalist political parties are becoming more popular amongst the voting populations as demonstrated by the elections of far-right candidates in France and Germany – as well as the European Parliament through France and Germany – and the United States. Ideologically, the far-right parties of each nation believe in cultural sovereignty and purity of their respective nations and the creation of an “in group.” Politically, this translates to an emphasis on strict immigration policies. In the most extreme cases, this results in to hate crimes against individuals perceived to be the “out” group, consisting of non-White, non-Christian peoples. The narrative that members of the “out” group will soon replace the “in” group is a significant source of fear which some extremist “in” groups have used to justify violence against the “out” group.

Russia is highly aware of the cultural differences that divide these groups and have proven to be skilled at exploiting them. Moscow has correctly identified far-right movements as vocal dissidents in each of the analyzed nations and has infiltrated many of their preferred mediums of communication and organization. The spread of dis- and misinformation which magnifies these differences has played a role in French, German,

⁴⁰³ Pifer, “The Russia-Ukraine War at Three Months.”

⁴⁰⁴ Pifer.

and American politics, and it may have played a role in the intensity to which French Identitarians, German AfD members, or American Three Percenters or Proud Boys feel compelled to react against “out” groups. However, it is not currently possible to directly attribute Russian disinformation campaigns to domestic terrorism in France, Germany, or the United States. Even the architects of such campaigns can never be sure of the extent to which their operations truly affect the target population and how much is due to other factors.⁴⁰⁵ Not all violence occurs because someone was coerced by a foreign actor; violence occurs every day, all over the world, for a number of reasons both related and unrelated to foreign and domestic policy. The correlation of violence to Russian disinformation, or the spread of harmful rhetoric, is an important phenomenon, but it is not yet possible to prove causation.

C. POLICY EVALUATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Countering disinformation is no simple task and trying to do so through political institutions increases the complexity. Additionally, it is not just governments that bear responsibility; so too do the social media networks which provide the platforms.

In March of 2022, the EU banned RT and Sputnik following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including both television and their internet-based platforms.⁴⁰⁶ In a meeting with G7 leaders and President Zelenskyy, the U.S. sanctioned Joint Stock Company Channel One Russia, Television Station Russia-1 and Joint Stock Company NTV Broadcasting Company, three of Russia’s most viewed state-controlled TV stations.⁴⁰⁷ Both the EU (and individual member states) and the U.S. have conducted inquiries of Russian disinformation campaigns. Both have subsequently created a number of agencies designed to curb disinformation with varying degrees of success. The EU External Action Committee plays the largest role in countering disinformation. This is in addition to the East Stratcom Task

⁴⁰⁵ The New York Times, *Operation InfeKtion: How Russia Perfected the Art of War*.

⁴⁰⁶ European Council, European Union, “EU Restrictive Measures against Russia over Ukraine (since 2014)” (European Council, European Union, April 21, 2022), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/>.

⁴⁰⁷ Christina Zhao and Allie Raffa, “U.S. Unveils Additional Sanctions Targeting Russian Media, Financing and Elites,” May 8, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/us-unveils-additional-sanctions-targeting-russian-media-financing-elit-rcna27780>.

Force established at the March 2015 European Council meeting.⁴⁰⁸ On the other hand, the U.S. announced the development of a Disinformation Governance Board under the Department of Homeland Security in 2022, which was paused just three weeks later after the organization and its lead, Nina Jankowicz, fell prey to assertions which likened it to a “Ministry of Truth.”⁴⁰⁹

Many Western nations have banned Russian media or have made efforts to counter disinformation, regardless of the source. Many have encouraged private companies to do the same, but some have chosen not to. Facebook and Twitter now have badges which label RT as “state-controlled” or “state-affiliated” media, and the RT website is still accessible from America.⁴¹⁰ The countries studied in this thesis all subscribe to free speech, but because of unique histories, French and German citizens agree that some speech is punishable because it was so potent during World War II. The First Amendment of the U.S. constitution has far fewer caveats, and the debate about whether or not speech should be filtered or restricted at all, what the limits should be if it is, and who or what should be responsible for it is hotly contested.

The war in Ukraine provides examples of truth successfully combatting disinformation. However, the audience must be receptive, and the message must come from a source that the audience trusts. According to the OECD in 2020, 41% of French citizens trust their government; 65% of Germans trust their government; and 46% of Americans trust their government.⁴¹¹ As it stands, current governments may not be the entities best suited for determining what information can and should be filtered. Disinformation experts

⁴⁰⁸ European Union External Action (EEAS), “Tackling Disinformation: Information on the Work of the EEAS Strategic Communication Division and Its Task Forces (SG.STRAT.2),” November 12, 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/countering-disinformation/tackling-disinformation-information-work-eeas-strategic-communication_en.

⁴⁰⁹ Taylor Lorenz, “How the Biden Administration Let Right-Wing Attacks Derail Its Disinformation Efforts,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/05/18/disinformation-board-dhs-nina-jankowicz/>.

⁴¹⁰ Mark McCarthy, “Why a Push to Exclude Russian State Media Would Be Problematic for Free Speech and Democracy,” *Brookings Institute, Techtank* (blog), April 14, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2022/04/14/why-a-push-to-exclude-russian-state-media-would-be-problematic-for-free-speech-and-democracy/>.

⁴¹¹ OECD, “Trust in Government” (OECD, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1787/1de9675e-en>.

agree that this is best accomplished by promoting internet literacy and critical evaluation of online sources, rather than attributing the task to the government or digital media companies.⁴¹²

D. FOR FURTHER STUDY

Active measures intend to exacerbate differences among the target population; my research has only analyzed the far-right end of the political spectrum. Research on the effects of the far left may balance the body of knowledge. Additionally, Russia is not the only nation that conducts the activities known as active measures; further research into other nations' activities, such as China, Iran, and North Korea, would provide more thorough knowledge of the role that foreign disinformation plays in Western societies.

⁴¹² Stephanie Pappas, "Fighting Fake News in the Classroom," *Monitor on Psychology* 53, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 1.

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