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Russia's Strategic Communication for influencing Germany's domestic political processes

Rainer Saks

We have entered an era where narratives and their exploitation through information operations increasingly become a subject of discussion in the context of influencing Western societies. This constitutes hostile influence activities aimed at affecting the domestic politics of Western countries and destabilizing their societies. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of Russia's strategic communication processes directed at Germany and to propose some strategic moves for the future.

The working culture of the current Russian government is largely based on the methods developed by the Soviet Union's security services, which were rooted in the goals of ideological influence. It is essential to understand that these practices trace their origins back to the Communist Party's propaganda and conspiratorial activities even before the events of 1917 in Russia. Germany has always held a special role in Soviet and later Russian propaganda. The entire history of the 20th century underscores Germany's significance for Russian leaders.

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Russian leaders do not harbour a manic desire to attack Germany or a utopian dream of bringing Germany under their control. However, Germany is regarded as both important and potentially dangerous, prompting maximum efforts to influence developments in the country. Traditionally, Russia has considered itself more familiar with Germany than with other Western European countries and nations.

Russia's approach has traditionally been described as multivectoral (a term they themselves use). In other words, both destructive and constructive approaches are simultaneously and consistently applied, with no perceived contradiction. The current Russian leadership will never regard Germany as an ally, partner, or friendly state, even when Russian leaders have good personal relations with German leaders. Even in cases of positive relations, destructive influence activities and the establishment of positions within German society continue. During periods of good relations, destructive influence may be reduced and rendered more covert.

Since the mid-1990s, the Russian leadership has re-cultivated "Chekist" working methods within Russia's security services (a term derived from the name of the first Bolshevik security service). Hostile and aggressive information campaigns are referred to in their working culture as influence operations, active measures, information operations, and psychological operations.

Russia's influence operations are shaped at the highest political level of the state. It is common for active measures to be planned comprehensively, employing various methods such as cyberattacks, corruption, organized crime, economic tools, and diplomatic measures. Central to these efforts is always the informational influence component. In other words, alongside straightforward media manipulation, Russia orchestrates active measures that Western countries increasingly label as hybrid attacks. For instance, information operations may serve to prepare the ground for a larger hybrid assault.

At the tactical level, Russian influence efforts seek to address daily and topical issues. At the strategic level, the aim is primarily to influence people's subconscious minds, an endeavour pursued deliberately using scientific methods.

General Principles of Information Operations and Disinformation

In general, the narratives used in Russia's information operations are reactive. This means that they take maximum advantage of the existing situation in the media space (e.g., conflicts that have already emerged in the media) and tailor their information attacks to fit this context. This approach minimizes the effort needed to create a suitable context for successful actions within the target's information space.

Despite the reactive nature of the narratives created by Russia, they are implemented using a tactically proactive method. In other words, the aim is to respond to ongoing events in the media space by steering the process in a direction favourable to Russia, thereby achieving initiative. The tactical goal is always to put the opposing side in a position where it can only react and is unable to take the initiative.

Russia makes very active use of social media and has spent years building connections in this field with networks and communities of interest (which may not always be aware of this). Traditionally, long-term work is carried out with journalists, think tanks, and academic institutions, both openly and covertly. As a result, Russia rarely spends time establishing new positions once an election campaign begins, instead relying on existing ones. Recent trends clearly show that the use of social media is considered effective, and the proportion of information flows directed there has steadily increased.

Disinformation is an important technical method that deserves specific mention but is neither the only nor the primary tool. Disinformation is used primarily to amplify already existing narratives rather than to create new ones.

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It is predominantly disseminated in social media groups, and if successful, attempts are made to push the disinformation into major media outlets. Russian services are highly skilled at targeting different social media groups with entirely distinct information tailored to influence them.

In Russia's information operations, disinformation is primarily a tactical-level tool. What matters most are the broad narratives that Russia seeks to spread and entrench in other information spaces.

If supporting major narratives does not yield results or if resources for achieving strategic success are lacking in the short term, destructive methods may dominate influence activities. In such cases, the Russian leadership is satisfied with creating as much confusion and conflict as possible within the target society.

Examples of Information Influence on the West and Germany

In the context of snap elections, Russia does not have time to construct entirely new narratives. From the public statements of Russian leaders, it can be inferred that the extraordinary elections in Germany came as a surprise to them. Russia maximizes the use of existing divisive societal topics and narratives.

It can be expected that Russia will not make many high-level political statements specifically regarding the German elections. Some exceptional statements might be made in situations where a specific event or influence operation is intended to be particularly amplified. The actions of Russian leaders often involve a degree of improvisation and emotional reactions, which can have unexpected effects.

For example, during the U.S. elections, in response to a journalist's question, the Russian president stated that he preferred Biden to win. This is likely true, as Putin views Biden as a weak president and therefore more convenient. At the same time, Russian propaganda continually spread information suggesting that Russia supported Trump's election. The Russian president's statement was likely unplanned. Overall, Western media became slightly confused, creating the impression that Russia had significant influence over the U.S. elections. Direct and substantial influence was small, but the media coverage was disproportionately extensive.

Regarding Muslim communities, Russia's collaboration with Iran could be used to reach certain target groups with the aim of escalating anxiety around Islamic issues in German society. Considering Russia's planning methods, any topic related to Islam is highly likely to be actively amplified in Germany. One potential narrative is to portray the situation in Syria as continuously destabilizing, leading to the emergence of a new Islamic state and thereby a new wave of refugees.

Although Russia's leadership generally dislikes excessive pressure on Israel, in the context of German elections, they might exploit Germany's somewhat unique policies towards Israel to generate divisive activity around Palestinian issues in German society. Any crimes associated with refugees or migrants are quickly amplified on social media.

In recent years, fear and destructive influence have been central elements in Russia's information campaigns. Fearful people are more likely to make irrational decisions. The following factors are utilized:

- **Fear of war:** Russia believes that it is possible to influence German citizens to vote for those who promise to stop supporting Ukraine or to pressure Ukraine into making concessions to Russia.
- **Exploiting Germany's natural pacifism:** Through very brutal information campaigns, Russia tries to evoke memories of World War II events. They are convinced that this will influence German citizens to retreat from active engagement.

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- **Amplifying narratives about the poor state of the German army:** The goal is to deepen the belief among Germans that their country is incapable of defending itself.
- **Energy cooperation with Germany:** This topic has receded into the background and is increasingly viewed as a thing of the past. However, if any German political party highlights this issue, stronger support for the topic from Russia can be expected.

Proposals for Strategic Moves

Germany's future relations with Russia will largely depend on developments in Ukraine, but not exclusively. The following aspects will play a significant role in defining the relationship between Germany and Russia moving forward:

- Germany's influence and role in the Ukrainian peace process.
- Germany's relations with Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as its participation in strengthening the cooperation in the Black Sea region.
- Germany's role in security arrangements regarding the Baltic Sea and future cooperation including security arrangements.
- Germany's role in the Caucasus and Central Asia (not the most decisive factor).
- Germany's role in managing relations with Belarus (a topic that significantly irritates Russia).
- Germany's role in rebuilding Syria and deterring Iran.

Germany once had the opportunity to significantly influence Russia's foreign and security policy through Russian gas exports, but it failed to capitalize on this potential. Attempts were made to engage Russia through economic and other forms of cooperation without directly linking the scope of cooperation to fulfilling trust-building measures. Arms control cooperation was minimal and failed to ensure deterrence. These mistakes should not be repeated.

If Germany wishes to establish functional bilateral relations with Russia in the future, it must assert itself toward the Russian government and establish clear rules of engagement:

- Economic cooperation should be limited to non-military sectors, at least until Russia joins arms control measures and satisfactorily complies with various treaty obligations.
- European Union sanctions should only be lifted if Ukraine's territorial integrity is fully restored.
- Energy cooperation should be limited to areas where Russia genuinely meets fundamental environmental protection requirements.

Germany could aim for a strategic leadership role, at least at the European level, in Ukraine's reconstruction process:

- Ukraine's energy and transportation infrastructure should be rebuilt and developed according to European standards. Strategic cooperation with Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic would help achieve this goal.
- Combating corruption and reforming Ukraine's law enforcement system are prerequisites for successful reconstruction and economic growth. Germany could aim for a leadership role in reforming Ukraine's legal system and public administration, involving the Nordic and Baltic countries in this process.
- Developing Ukraine's defence industry in cooperation with countries such as France.

Germany could significantly increase its activity in security cooperation in the Baltic and North Sea regions:

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- Developing a stronger security cooperation format within the Council of the Baltic Sea States.
- Germany's navy playing an active role in securing critical infrastructure in the Baltic and North Sea regions.
- Enhancing military mobility in the Baltic Sea region.

Ukraine's reconstruction also provides an opportunity for a more active policy in the Western Balkans:

- It is important to develop the infrastructure of these countries to European standards, thereby strengthening their economic ties with Europe.
- Energy cooperation with all countries in the region, particularly Serbia, is especially critical.
- Participation in energy and infrastructure development is equally important across all Central and Eastern European countries.

Germany should elevate its strategic communication to a level that matches its economic strength in Europe and the world - the strength and stability of Germany is vital for the future of Europe.

The Author

Rainer Saks served as the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia from 2015 to 2020. Prior to this role, he held several high-ranking positions within the Estonian government. Rainer Saks worked as a member of the Management Board at Cybexer Technologies, an Estonian company specializing in cyber defense until the end of 2024.

Rainer Saks has been diligently writing daily reports on the Russian war against Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict that has been the most read and shared reports in Estonian press.

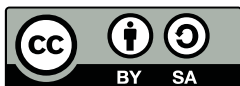
Imprint

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Oliver Morwinsky
Leiter Auslandsbüros für die Baltischen Staaten
Europäische und Internationale Zusammenarbeit
www.kas.de

Produced with financial support from the Federal Republic of Germany (Only if printed)

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