Experts Unite Against Russian Disinformation's Threat to Democracy and Religious Freedom

International Experts Confront Russian Disinformation Threats to Democracy and Religious Freedom

WASHINGTON DC, DC, UNITED STATES, November 4, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Experts Unite Against Russian Disinformation's Threat to Democracy and Religious Freedom

Prominent leaders address the impact of Russian disinformation on global [democracy and religious freedoms](#) at a pivotal conference in Washington, D.C.

From left to right: Areig Elhag, Iryna Valles, Kateryna Odarchenko

As the European Union (EU) elections approach, international experts gathered at the "Russian Disinformation: Tactics, Influence, and Threats to National Security" conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., organized by the [Coalition against disinformation](#), to shed light on the Russian Federation's expansive disinformation campaigns

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>
> *Kateryna Odarchenko*

aimed at destabilizing European democracies. Experts, including Andrew Kreig, an American journalist and attorney; Jason Shelton, policy advisor; T.C. Cameron, communications expert; Iryna Kopanytsia, human rights activist; and Serhiy Kolisnyk, Managing Director of LOBBY CLUB (Kyiv office), discussed Russia's far-reaching propaganda apparatus, examining its impact on electoral integrity, ideological influence through religious institutions, and broader implications for democratic stability across Europe and beyond.

Kateryna Odarchenko, head of the Institute for Democracy and Development "PolitA,"

emphasized the infiltration of Russian disinformation in European elections, with her research documenting how Moscow's narratives penetrate the political landscapes of key EU countries. She noted that Russian operatives exploit social fractures to weaken democratic institutions, evident in recent German elections. Russia's portrayal of Germany's Green Party leader Annalena Baerbock, often targeted through rhetoric, exemplifies attempts to sow discord and alter public opinion. These tactics extend across borders to fracture alliances and weaken the resolve of democratic societies.

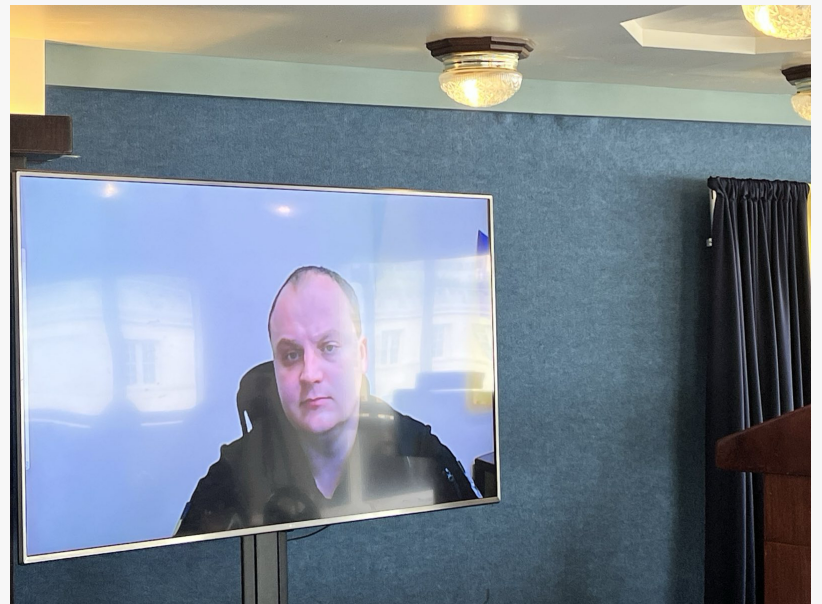Anton Stepanov, Senior Investigator at the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU)

Andrii Oliinyk, Head of the Aggression Division at Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General, highlighted disinformation campaigns that frame the Russian invasion as a "sacred war" endorsed by Russian religious leaders. "Russian military chaplains are distorting facts and promoting persecution based on religious beliefs in occupied territories," Oliinyk stated, noting looting of Ukrainian property and religious sites. This influence extends into Europe, where organizations operate under the Russian Orthodox Church's patronage, spreading anti-Western narratives.

Andrii Oliinyk, Head of the Aggression Division at Ukraine's Office of the Prosecutor General

Dietmar Pichler, communications expert from Austria and director of the Disinfo Resilience Network, analyzed the Russian Orthodox Church's historical and current role in supporting Kremlin propaganda. Tracing back to the Soviet era when high-ranking church officials held KGB ties, Pichler detailed how today's Church promotes a militant narrative of the war against Ukraine, branding it a "Holy War" to defend "Holy Russia." Russian religious authorities endorse Kremlin ideology, sanctifying violence against perceived enemies. The Russian Orthodox Church remains a vital channel for Kremlin messaging, framing war as morally justified.

Lesya Zaburanna, a member of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, addressed Russian

disinformation campaigns' global impact, using disinformation to evade accountability for war crimes. "Russia denies responsibility for war crimes, refusing to recognize culpability," Zaburanna remarked, underscoring disinformation's role in destabilization.

Political consultant Dina Shaikhislam further explained how these disinformation narratives work in conjunction with targeted hate rhetoric to exploit social divides, both in Russia and internationally. Shaikhislam highlighted how anti-cult campaigns and narratives in Russia systematically label religious and civil society groups as threats to public safety. Her examples demonstrate how Kremlin-backed disinformation frequently scapegoats religious minorities—like Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and civil society organizations such as ALLATRA —to rally public fear and justify repressive policies. This fear-driven rhetoric effectively stifles diverse voices and erodes social cohesion, creating a climate in which disinformation flourishes and independent organizations struggle to function.

The conference also explored the challenges faced by religious groups in Russian-occupied territories, where repression of non-affiliated churches highlights the Kremlin's desire to suppress any faiths that might resist its ideological grip. The persecution of religious organizations, including Protestant churches forced to operate underground, represents a systematic campaign to erase cultural and religious diversity in occupied areas. With numerous documented cases, such as the kidnapping and murder of members of the Transfiguration of the Lord Protestant Church, Julia Piletskaya, a Ukrainian political expert, outlined how these oppressive measures align with broader efforts to control local populations and strip communities of any unapproved beliefs or independent institutions.

Cybersecurity also emerged as a central theme, with Slovenian expert Tadej Nared, co-founder of SICEH Foundation, explaining the implications of Russian disinformation on the digital front. Nared emphasized that the digital realm offers fertile ground for disinformation, where misleading narratives can go viral and weaken democratic societies from within. As these campaigns exploit cyberspace, they also expose new vulnerabilities for societies already dealing with cyber threats. According to Nared, strengthening cybersecurity measures to protect information integrity is essential to countering the effects of Russian disinformation, which targets digital platforms to sway opinions, manipulate emotions, and erode public trust.

The other session, "Elections Under Siege: How Russian Disinformation Undermines Democratic Processes," was moderated by Paolo von Schirach, President of the Global Policy Institute (GPI) and Professor of Political Science at Bay Atlantic University, Washington DC. This panel explored how Russian disinformation campaigns actively disrupt democratic processes worldwide. Experts, including Paolo von Schirach, president of GPI, highlighted how fabricated narratives are spread to foster division and mistrust in electoral systems across the United States and Europe, disrupting democratic stability.

The conference concluded with the release of an in-depth report titled, Russian Disinformation: Tactics, Impact, and Threats to National Security. This report compiles key insights on how Russia

manipulates narratives around religious freedom to divide societies and undermine democratic governance. The full agenda and speaker list are available here, the report, and video can be accessed by the public to inform counter-disinformation efforts.

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Full report here
https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/report-russian-disinformation-tactics-impact-and-threats-to-national-security-2-pdf/272830764?fbclid=IwY2xjawGQ3L9leHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHfIkERETizAKWQGbpTgkQhtSzGXS3508YtEkQXMTa_syo-V-tqVZQJH6vg_aem_kFIj1lXiXdfaXl2xz8Dkhw

List of members of coalition against disinformation:
- Institute for Democracy and Development "PolitA"
- Global Policy Institute
- LingvaLexa
- Voice of Crimea
- Lenta.ua
- Trainer Association of Ukraine
- The Department of Countering Crimes Committed in Armed Conflict of the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine
- The Slovenia Certified Ethical Hackers
- Bohush Communications
- The Center for Russian Studies
- The public organization "Stop Corruption"

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