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# Discussion Paper

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## HOW TO COUNTERACT RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN FRANCE<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. THE GOALS OF RUSSIA

Among all the EU member states, France is the country which has a very rich history of bilateral relations with Russia, with ramifications at all levels and fields. These relations are well-established at the level of political parties, business circles, cultural actors, universities, professional groups, etc. Kremlin has been quite savvy in attempting to use its good relations in various fields for political purposes; however, in France, that was not always successful.

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*The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Embassy of Sweden in Ukraine, the International Renaissance Foundation, and the Open Society Initiative for Europe (OSIFE)*

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To date, the knowledge about Ukraine in France has been quite limited and often presented a picture that did not entirely reflect the state of affairs in Kyiv. Most often, ordinary French people associate Ukraine with Chernobyl, while many in the French society and political elite see Ukraine as a highly corrupt country where politicians use the EU and reform slogans in order to get greater control and increase their wealth. Since the Revolution of Dignity, the image of Ukraine started to evolve; however, this process is very slow and inconsistent.

Even for those who are following Ukraine, these days, the picture looks grim. The overall messaging is that “Crimea is forgotten, war is stabilized, “Minsk” does not work, and Ukraine is in election mood”. The description above is very different to the situation of two-three years ago, when engagement with Ukraine was much higher on the agenda. Today, Ukraine is a “hot potato” – everyone wants to “play a little” and pass it on.

The existence of the negative image of Ukraine and lower interest towards it helps Russia to set in motion its propaganda against Kyiv and to try to shape the public opinion in France in a way that would deepen the distrust towards Ukraine and serve the Russian agenda.

Russia’s policy in France is not very distinct from the other EU countries. The main goal is to **safeguard Moscow’s political agenda, promote economic cooperation and “facilitate” EU fragmentation**, especially when it comes to policies directed against Russia.

Unlike most of the countries, Russia’s policy is **not only proactive** and positive when it comes to business, but also **negative and damage oriented** when it comes to politics. The disruptive policy of Russia in France is aimed at **keeping Russia’s influence and weakening the EU**. Russia cannot

stand the EU’s power and is not able to compete with Brussels. Therefore, **division, discontinuity of power or social and economic dysfunction** could “empower” Russia to compete with the EU.

The overwhelming negative agenda does not exclude the positive one. There are significant efforts carried out by the Russian actors in order to **attract French business** to Russian projects and thus make France more dependent on Kremlin’s agenda. Moreover, the business dialogue with the French authorities is used by Russia to **diminish its isolation** in Europe.

## 2. INSTRUMENTS USED BY RUSSIA

There is quite a diverse set of tools used by Russia in France, covering all important areas that could influence the dialogue between the two countries and enforce the Russian narrative:

**1) ideology**, or rather anti-ideological pattern, mixing “anti-imperialism”, anti-Americanism, anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-liberal, anti-democracy, anti-rule of law, anti-human rights and elements with conspiracy theories in a great and blurry amalgamation. Among the European countries, French society, despite having a high media literacy, represents a relatively fertile ground for conspiracy theories. For instance, according to a recent survey, 54% of the respondents think that CIA is involved in the assassination of President Kennedy,<sup>2</sup> although one should note that the example is not necessarily representative.

<sup>2</sup> *Enquête sur le complotisme, IFOP, Jean-Jaures, page 70, [https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2018/0108/115158\\_-\\_rapport\\_02.01.2017.pdf](https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2018/0108/115158_-_rapport_02.01.2017.pdf)*



**2) political** networks, with a vocal support of populist parties on the far-right and on the left, but also some MPs of former mainstream parties – Socialist Party and Republican Party. First of all, as an example, the far-right populist party National Front led by Marine Le Pen have received funding from the Russian banks. In 2014, National Front received 11 million euro from a Moscow based lender “First Czech Russian bank” and Jean Marie Le Pen, the founder of National Front, received a loan of 2 million euro from a Cypriot Fund reportedly controlled by former KGB agent Yuri Kudimov. On the political left, Russia has been providing more passive ideological sourcing for “Unsubmissive France” led by Jean-Luc Melenchon, which is a left populist party peddling, among others, on ideas of withdrawing from NATO and possible exit from the EU.

**3) media**, having present in France Russia Today and Sputnik, but also a variety of far left and far right conspiracy websites spreading misinformation that the two aforesaid channels feed. The political elite seems to be quite resilient to the Russian media narrative in France. However, Russian media is more popular within the wider public. The propaganda style information is partially getting traction among the French society, especially within the circles of migrants from the former Soviet Union. The Russian media is a primary source for the Russian speaking community, and even for many Ukrainians living in France Russian media represents an information source or the only information source.

**4) military**, with dangerous and hostile moves along the territory of France by Russian military. In January 2016, the French navy detected a Russian submarine carrying

nuclear missiles in the Bay of Biscay. Also, at least four times in the past three years, the Russian fighters have been intercepted on the French coast. Certain additional influence is streamlined through the Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict.

**5) business**, which also has particular outreach to the political elite. The French business represents one of the most powerful elements used by Russia to keep France moderate towards Kremlin and avoid isolation and weaken the pro-sanction policy to which France adheres under the EU. Although after the last parliamentary elections, many of the Russian sympathizers who used to vocalize Russian narrative against sanctions in the Parliament before did not make it to the legislature. Examples that are raising Russia’s profile in France are the energy company Engie, which has joined the Gazprom’s project Nord Stream 2 investing 298 million euro in 2017, or the oil company Total, which is involved in many projects and recently pledged to join Russia’s Arctic LNG-2.

**6) cultural**, in which Russia is trying to use high-level cultural products to re-enter the political dialogue. Russia is organizing many cultural activities in France, which in part are used for political purposes. For instance, in 2018, Putin and Macron supported the “Trianon Dialogue”, which appears to be a project aimed at minimizing European sanctions against Russia and re-establishing Russia’s positive image. The project is encouraging interactions in joint theater production, school trips, sister city cooperation, and real estate investments. From the Russian side, the project is overseen by Gennady Timchenko, Vladimir Yakunin (both on U.S. sanctions list) and former Ambassador to Paris Alexandre Orlov. From the French side, all the members are people who do

not belong to politics, but have a soft power, given their position or achievements: Director of Museum of Versailles, astronaut, a ballet star, and the CEOs of Total and BlaBlaCar. Emmanuel Macron's visit to Economic Forum in Saint Petersburg, where he met Vladimir Putin, has also been organized within this "Trianon Dialogue".

### **3. BEST PRACTICES IN COUNTERING RUSSIAN POLICY AND KREMLIN'S VULNERABILITIES**

#### **3.1. COUNTERING RUSSIA'S POLICIES: BEST PRACTICES AND VULNERABILITIES**

Surprisingly or not, most of the best practices in fighting Russian disruptive policy in France have been managed quite successfully, at least in the cases where the legislation provides for tools for involvement of the public institutions. Perhaps, France has been less successful when it comes to business, but, especially from a French perspective, it is very difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between strengthening Russia-France business ties and the Kremlin's influence in France.

One of the game-changers in the French politics was the parliamentary elections held in 2017. Most of the French politicians, mainly from the Republic Party, who used to have long term relations with Russia, did not make it to the Parliament. Therefore, the political landscape was overturned after elections and Russia lost about 80% of its influence and "useful idiots", as well as one third in the Senate. Russia could not anticipate these movements and they were quite sure in antagonizing Macron.

The campaign orchestrated by the Russian media against Macron during presidential elections has been self-damaging. First, after multiple propagandistic materials, which denigrated Macron, he banned access to RT and Sputnik to his headquarters during the presidential campaign. The mentioned Russian media were accused of spreading lies about Emmanuel Macron, including allegations on an extra-marital gay relationship. Later, once elected as President, Macron surprised the entire world by denouncing RT and Sputnik as "liars" and "agents of propaganda" during a joint press-conference with Vladimir Putin. Macron's statement went viral in the media and the image of the Russian media, which was suffering anyway, has worsened even more.

However, as RT and Sputnik continued distorting news and spreading misinformation, the French authorities started to react. First, the above Russian media outlets were warned several times about the fake news they presented to the French public. RT has been experiencing similar problems in Germany, the UK and the US. In France, on the other hand, the protecting mechanisms against fake news have advanced. On July 4, 2018, the French lawmakers adopted legislation, which allows judges to remove or block media content that is deemed to be false. The law will allow the candidate to appeal to the justice in order to stop dissemination of false information during three months before the elections. The idea of such a law was initiated by President Macron because he believed that foreign media have tried to interfere in the elections in France. During heated debates in the National Assembly, which lasted well into the night, there was also opposition to the bill. Certain MPs felt that the anti-fake news bill was walking a fine line between freedom of speech and censorship and expressed concerns



about potential infringements on freedom of expression. Others, like leftist Jean-Luc Melenchon, denounced the bill calling it a targeted measure meant to specifically ban RT and Sputnik.<sup>3</sup> Following the debates in the National Assembly, the Senate rejected the bill few weeks later, but in the end, after several rounds of debates, the bill was adopted on 20 November, 2018.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the bill could be still challenged in the Constitutional Court, but regardless of the specific outcome, the trend towards exercising control over foreign influence on elections will continue in France.

The law also allows to force social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, to become fully transparent and, if necessary, to disclose the source of sponsored content on the platforms, in order to fight destabilization attempts by foreign-funded organizations.<sup>5</sup>

Actually, the social media platforms in France already have an experience of such campaigns. Facebook stated publicly that it has suspended about 30,000 accounts for promoting propaganda and election-related spam, while later, the number rose to more than 70,000.

Among other elements detected in France was the open letter of a group of French experts on Russia who called the Audiovisual Council to suspend the broadcasting license

for Russia Today, which is “sowing discord and weakening democracies”.<sup>6</sup> Although the license was not suspended, this kind of appeals put pressure on the responsible authorities to be vigilant on the activity of RT in France and act against misinformation. Additionally, RT assembled an ethics committee, as required by the French law. However, the committee seems biased, since among others (diplomat Anne Gazeau-Secret, journalists Jacques-Marie Bourget and Majed Nehmé, Radio France’s ex-president Jean-Luc Hees) it has on board Thierry Mariani, who is a former Senator and one of the most vocal supporters of Vladimir Putin. If RT’s license won’t be suspended following the new cases of spreading misinformation, a call to establish an independent and impartial committee would be appropriate.

RT broadcasting in France is also problematic due to the fact that this channel is missing the necessary human resources. The image of RT is so poor in France, that there have been serious difficulties in recruiting any prominent journalists (probably, except the well-known anchorman Frédéric Taddei) while establishing the channel, despite the 19-million-euro budget and 150 planned positions.<sup>7</sup>

The resistance of French journalists against the propaganda should be praised. One example is Le Monde’s Decodex project aimed at fact-checking products based on a large database identifying unreliable information and manipulation. On

<sup>3</sup> “Fausse information:” l’Assemblée vote les propositions de loi, *Le Monde*, 04.07.2018. [https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2018/07/04/fausses-informations-l-assemblee-vote-les-propositions-de-loi\\_5325489\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2018/07/04/fausses-informations-l-assemblee-vote-les-propositions-de-loi_5325489_4408996.html)

<sup>4</sup> Ce que contient la loi française contre les «fake news», <https://www.france24.com/fr/20181121-loi-contre-fake-news-definitivement-adoptee-macron-election>

<sup>5</sup> In France, RT Is Getting No Love, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/in-france-rt-is-getting-no-love/>

<sup>6</sup> « Monsieur Schrameck, suspendez l’attribution de la licence de diffusion à Russia Today », [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/12/20/monsieur-schrameck-suspendez-l-attribution-de-la-licence-de-diffusion-a-russia-today\\_5232472\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/12/20/monsieur-schrameck-suspendez-l-attribution-de-la-licence-de-diffusion-a-russia-today_5232472_3232.html)

<sup>7</sup> La chaîne RT France peine à recruter des grands noms du journalisme, <http://www.europe1.fr/medias-tele/la-chaine-russe-rt-peine-a-recruter-en-france-3456644>

a much broader scale, the media awareness program of the Ministry of Education of France, which is taking place in French schools, is a very good example to follow for other countries and potentially, an interesting avenue of cooperation between France and Ukraine.

There are also supranational instruments used to localize and isolate Russia's policy. Although the EU as an institution did not play the leading role in fighting Russia's disruptive activity, Brussels still offered the necessary platform to align all the EU member states, provided technical advice while drafting and implementing sanctions, and enforced a common position, which is difficult to abandon for any given EU country if it is alone or its arguments are weak. The same is with the NATO membership, which involves a high level of socialization with other NATO members and provides for tools to sideline Russian involvement. Last but not least, Germany is very important for France. And if Germany is on board, it is much easier to counter Russia's malicious influence.

An interesting case to learn is the "Center for Representation of Donetsk Republic in France". This so-called representation center was registered by regional authorities of Marseilles as a public association headed by the former member of the National Front Hubert Fayard. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of France went to court in order to shut down the so-called representation; however, the process was lost, and the court decided to allow the association to continue its activity. The argument of the "center" is that they aim to develop humanitarian and cultural cooperation between France and "Donbas". From a legal point of view, shutting down such a civic association started by French citizens is not an easy case, since establishing an NGO belongs to the civic rights defined by the French Constitution. In turn, Russian media

and the head of the association presented the court decision as an act of recognition of the DPR, which is of course a manipulation. That being said, the webpage of the so-called center is presented as an "official" page of the "DPR" with such services as "assistance to obtain a DPR visa" etc. The French authorities regret that the opening of this "center" happened and were quite certain that they will find a mechanism to close it down. Moreover, a new "association" was opened in August 2018, following the same blueprint as in the first case in Marseille. As noted by French experts, the "center" is a part of manipulative and hybrid tactics of Russia in France, and its opening is a clear sign that Russia has an agenda in France and uses the vulnerabilities of the French legislation to its advantage.

### 3.2. THE VULNERABILITIES OF THE RUSSIA'S TOOLS THAT COULD BE USED BY UKRAINE OR ITS PARTNERS FOR THEIR NEUTRALIZATION

The Russian instruments are functioning well to some extent, but at the same time, many of these are not lasting and are often controversial and self-damaging. The structural vulnerabilities are as follows:

**a) No access to mainstream policy.** Russia's propaganda instruments are mostly aimed at people, organizations, and political parties whose main agenda is to criticize the system: far-right and far-left political movements, conspiracy theories supporters, and populists. It is a structural failure, since the bulk of French public opinion is supporting political parties that do not seek to change the system, rather to improve it. This dates back not to Macron's election but rather to the beginning of the Fifth Republic (1958), even if last presidential





election showed a move toward a centrist approach. In that context, it is questionable what real and sustainable success could be achieved by Russia's information strategy, apart from disturbing the public debate at its margins. Some could say that creating dissatisfaction in the society is also a result; however, the nationwide popular movements are pushing to high politics people devoted to the interests of France.

**b) Controversial recipients.** The two main recipients of Russia's information strategy are far-left and far-right political movements. The National Front's ties with Kremlin are blatant (e.g. loans from Russian banks, Marine Le Pen's visits to Moscow ahead of the French presidential election) and this has been rather a burden than an advantage. As for the Unsubmissive France, they have not formalized their ties with Russia: during his 2018 trip to Moscow, Jean-Luc Melenchon had not been received by any Kremlin officials. If far-left supporters can be seduced by Kremlin's anti-American stance, it's uneasy for them to assume anti-LGBT or anti-migrant propaganda. Putting this into a historical perspective, during the Soviet Union era, Moscow relied in France on the French Communist Party and its affiliated movements. Now, it has to deal with recipients that struggle against each other in the French political debate, which in turn seriously hampers the efficiency of Russia's information strategy toward France.

**c) Lack of credibility.** Russia's information strategy heavily relies on fake news. When the fake news refers to Syria or Ukraine, they do not really affect, in one or other direction, the French public debate, aside from some marginal groups mentioned above. On the other hand, when the fake news is about France, it usually causes more damage to

Russia's information strategy than brings advantages. On several occasions, French mainstream media denounced RT and Sputnik articles that were providing a biased coverage of French actuality. For instance, at the beginning of April 2017, Le Monde published an article on opinion polls during electoral campaign, criticizing a dubious poll putting Francois Fillon on the top of the candidates and reposted by Sputnik.<sup>8</sup> Other cases, as mentioned in the previous chapter, triggered the Parliament to adopt legislation that would provide a blueprint for fighting propaganda.

**d) Negative reputation of pro-Russian politicians.**

The Russians were always bidding on the "wrong" person in France. The story of Francois Fillon is a vivid lesson. When campaigning for a presidential position, Fillon was accused of mismanagement of funds, paying his wife for the job she never did. The fact is that in most of the cases all politicians on which Russians bid are having issues with their reputation – remember Le Pen scandal where she unduly claimed 300,000 euros for a parliamentary assistant. There are also other cases where potential financial interest has guided the pro-Russian feelings of the French politicians. Therefore, this is a vulnerability of Russia. "A decent politician who is a true patriot of his country has far less chances to be Russia's favorite." Therefore, Russia's candidates are often having issues with the law and this could be further explored.

More to add, French elections are not really focused on international issues but rather

<sup>8</sup> *Présidentielle: comment différencier vrais et faux sondages ?*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/04/05/presidentielle-comment-differencier-vrais-et-faux-sondages\\_5106293\\_4355770.html#4DzHF6SUzkT31LTV.99](https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/04/05/presidentielle-comment-differencier-vrais-et-faux-sondages_5106293_4355770.html#4DzHF6SUzkT31LTV.99)

on local ones. Russians themselves did not want Le Pen to win the elections since they understood that her presidency would be impossible to navigate. However, she was doing a good job in weakening France. Thus, Russians tried to propel Francois Fillon as the main “Russian” candidate.

There are other vulnerabilities, which are not structural but still present an occasional opportunity for Ukraine.

Russia has made an enormous effort in uniting Russian diaspora and it was partly successful but still, Moscow was not able to co-opt those who consider themselves victims of Soviet Union or Putin’s regime. Also, the political hardening of Putin’s regime helped to structure opposition movements within the Russian diaspora.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the Russian diaspora in France is divided. Most of them are supportive of the Russian regime; however, some 10-15% of them are against the Kremlin and are very active in spreading their message. The existence of the opposition within the Russian diaspora is even more precious since the message spread by Russians is more credible than that of other actors opposing Russia.

Because of excessive propaganda and biased positions, Russian GONGOs also lost a lot of influence in France. However, Russia is now attempting to rebuild its lost influence with the aggregated support from media, cultural events, diplomacy, and business.

Russia has tried to use its business ties to shape France’s policy towards itself,

weaken the EU’s unity and demand lifting of sanctions. One of the arguments Russia is using in France is that “Germany earns a lot of money in Russia, and French business could too”. And indeed, many of the French businesses who work with Russia are pushing for the easing of sanctions, and even despite the fact that President Macron is a business-oriented person and business is important to him, they did not manage to put business above politics, even if business does play a very important role. Therefore, Russia did not manage (yet) to use business for political purposes. The only way for Ukraine to weaken Russian push for business is to engage with France in serious business projects. And although it is clear that Ukraine is not able to compete with Russia in offering business opportunities, it may give a big headache to Russian business narrative.

While French policy is not as transactional as the US policy under Trump, as noted above, the business projects play a very important role. The recent deal of Ukraine with France in buying Airbus helicopters is a very good step to establish relations based on joint interest. Although the Ukrainian state is the one who pays the bill, Minister Avakov, as a “face” of the contract, has seriously raised his profile in France and is considered a result-oriented person. The reactions among decision-makers in Ukraine have been mixed, as the contract was seriously criticized by the Ukrainian Ambassador to the US, leaving the impression that the American partners are dissatisfied with the fact that Ukraine decided to buy helicopters from France. Fortunately for Ukraine, the leadership did not try to roll back the contract. The arms contracts are very important in order to keep a certain country on the agenda. The example to be considered here

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<sup>9</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Soft Power in France*, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/programs/archive/Russian-Soft-Power-in-France>





is the decision of Poland to withdraw from the military acquisition contract with France, which damaged the relations between Warsaw and Paris so much that they are at their lowest.

Other possible positive record on the business agenda could be a potential deal with Alstom on providing locomotives to Ukraine. In early 2018, French company Alstom opened its office in Kyiv and is working on a project, which if successful, would provide to Ukraine and Georgia about 350 locomotives by 2025. Alstom is also involved in Russia, but their presence in Ukraine is changing the map of French business, and Kremlin's arguments about money earned by French business in Russia are becoming vulnerable. Moreover, Ukraine needs to balance its business with key partners and especially on the EU vs. US line. Last year, Ukraine signed a \$1 billion contract with General Electric on supply of locomotives, which is a little bit strange from the perspective that the EU-produced locomotives are considered better and maybe cheaper. However, most probably, it was a political decision to buy the GE locomotives.

The other potential vulnerability is the possible US sanctions for companies involved in the construction of the Nord Stream 2. The French company Engie, which is a part of the consortium, is potentially vulnerable since the US is heating for possible sanctions against the companies participating in the pipeline construction – already in 2017, the US Congress passed the necessary legislation. Although Engie's President claims that the sum of investments of the French company is lower than the one for which sanctions could be applied (the law provides for imposing sanctions on the individuals who invested more than \$ 5 million in the construction of Russian export pipelines a year or \$ 1 million in a

lump sum).<sup>10</sup> Still, if the sanctions are applied and the project becomes unprofitable, the investments, even smaller, are all in vain.

In regard to the Nord Stream 2, the French seem dissatisfied with the way the Ukrainian part raised the issues during a high-level meeting of French and Ukrainian officials. According to certain sources in France, the Ukrainian part wanted France to make a choice between investments in Russia (Nord Stream 2) or possible investments in Ukraine (a potential renewable energy project in Chernobyl region). That position was perceived by the French part as an attempt to blackmail France and therefore, the French part refused to discuss further under the presented paradigm. However, in autumn 2018, some discussions took place regarding the Engie's participation in a large investment in the renewable sector in Ukraine, and even if there is no decision yet, the fact that this discussion is taking place is a good sign.

A potentially vulnerable position of Russia is its presence in Syria and the mismatch of French policy with the policy of Russia, as well as the narrative that only together with Russia, France could fight terrorism. Ukraine could take advantage of this situation and provide practical arguments for military cooperation with France. One possible option is the participation in the peacekeeping operation in Mali and provision of military training in modern warfare for France and partners from Africa. Ukraine has a unique experience in fighting Russian hybrid and conventional warfare, which could be of interest, especially in the light of possible expansion of Russian military outreach in Northern Africa.

<sup>10</sup> French company Engie to support Nord Stream 2 despite US sanctions, <http://tass.com/world/985380>

To sum up, in its anti-Ukrainian strategy, Moscow can rely in France on several different segments of the French public opinion. However, none of these segments is strong enough to seriously influence the debate and it is difficult to see any radical shift in French policy toward Ukraine that could be inspired by Russia's information strategy.

### 3.3 RUSSIAN FAILURE CASE STUDIES

#### CASE STUDY 1: CYBER-ATTACK ON MACRON'S CAMPAIGN

Just two days ahead of the second round of presidential elections in France, Macron's campaign office was hacked. The hacked information was posted on the American 4chan webpage and then reposted on Wikileaks. However, things did not look as linear as it may appear. The reason for this is the counter-offensive of Macron's office staff who flooded landing pages with fake passwords and other data confusing the hackers and making it virtually impossible to gain access to the campaign's emails, according to Macron's head of digital staff, Mounir Mahjoubi.<sup>11</sup> When the data, both true and false, was captured by the hackers, the candidate Emmanuel Macron was first to announce that his campaign was a victim of a massive cyber-attack and that the information on Wikileaks is false and throws a shadow on the veracity of the provided documents containing 14GB of business and private information from Macron's campaign. The most important what Macron did is that he took control of the PR and messaging by doubting the

leaked information, providing a counter-narrative and basically controlling the short-news cycle that fed the journalists with information. The fact that Macron took leadership in this situation was not accidental, but a prepared contingency plan outsourced from lessons learned from the US case.<sup>12</sup>

According to Macron's staff, from 2,000 to 3,000 attempts to hack the Macron's office were made during the campaign. The research of the cyber-attack led to the hacker group APT28, which apparently has been linked to the Russian Government in the World Anti-Doping Agency attacks.

It is important to note that the first attempts to hack French entities date back to 2015, when one of the major French channels TV5Monde has been subject to a massive cyber-attack that interrupted broadcasting for 9 hours. Although the messages posted by the hackers attempted to link them to the Islamic State by calling themselves "Cyber Caliphate", the subsequent investigation led to the APT28 group.

The French state actors reacted swiftly to the threats posed by hackers in the light of the presidential and parliamentary elections. French Network and Information Security Agency, France's main cyber security institution, has warned all the political parties in France of a cyber threat to which they were exposed and provided cyber security awareness raising and training for political parties, except the National Front, which refused to participate. The French infrastructure aimed at countering the cyber-

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<sup>11</sup> *How the Macron campaign fought back against Putin's hackers in the final hour*, <https://www.newsweek.com/emmanuel-macron-french-election-uk-vote-cyber-attack-hack-security-marine-le-596310>

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<sup>12</sup> *How Macron just Changed Cyber Security Forever*, <https://intpolicydigest.org/2017/05/20/macron-just-changed-cyber-security-forever/>



attacks has been significantly developed over the last years. As a preemptive measure, France has halted electronic voting for French citizens abroad.

Another part of the effective response of the French state institutions to the cyber-attack that resulted in a leak of materials from Macron's campaign 48 hours before the elections was the instruction of the French Electoral Commission to the French media not to publish any content from leaked information, risking criminal charges in case of the disobedience.

It is difficult to assume that the leak of documents from Macron's campaign just few days before elections would have influenced the outcome of the vote. The development of the attack on Macron's campaign was a part of the Russian exercise, so-called "armed reconnaissance" (разведка боем); however, Russians did not calculate the consequences of their actions, which have turned Macron's narrative a priori skeptical to Russia. The cyber-attack was an important element in his positioning towards Russia, but it does not mean at all that President Macron is not going to talk to Russia or do business, since above all, he represents the French interests. However, Russia failed to influence the elections, positioned Macron negative towards Russia, and provided for situational partners for Ukraine. The individuals involved in defending Macron's team from Russian cyber-attack are irritated by Russia and are open to take on Russia by using various formats. This does not make them automatically pro-Ukrainian, but they are Ukraine's natural allies, and Kyiv could identify those who could help in passing the right messages.

## CASE STUDY 2: FRENCH-RUSSIAN MISTRAL DEAL

Russia ordered two Mistral class amphibious assault ships from France in 2011. The need for Mistral ships was identified after the 2008 Russian war against Georgia: according to Russian military, they could have significantly shortened the time of operation in Georgia. Once the contract was signed, there was some discussion within NATO and concerned countries (especially Georgia) who protested against the deal. However, the real risk to the French-Russian deal appeared with the Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the aggression in the East of Ukraine. Moreover, some argue that the US pressure on former President Francois Hollande has been instrumental.

The French decision to halt the sale of the Mistral type ships to Russia has been often labeled as a good example of Russia's failure in France. However, things are not as straightforward as they may appear. The study case revealed that the intention to buy the Mistrals was guided by Anatoly Serdiukov who basically said that Russia produces a lot of unnecessary military equipment. The domestic producers were quite unhappy with the deal and lobbied in favor of not buying the Mistrals when the opportunity appeared. Plus, the willingness of Egypt to buy the ships ordered by Russia was playing a serious role, since Russia was first in line to equip the ships. The Mistrals were planned to accommodate Russian helicopters and therefore, Egypt had to buy Russian military communication and control systems for equipping the Mistrals. According to some estimations, the contract between Egypt and Russia is worth \$1 billion, which is basically the price Russia was supposed to pay to French producers.

In regard to sale of the Mistrals to Russia, France had one more weak point. The PESC (2008/944) position on the EU Arms Export Controls has

eight criteria with which the Russian-French deal was not compliant. Though there was a certain dissatisfaction regarding the deal inside the EU, the member states did not raise the bar, since it was not the first time that the EU countries did not comply with its own rules.<sup>13</sup>

The Mistral case shows that the relative conditions to stop the sale of the Mistral were already in place before the Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, while the elements that stopped the deal were external, the real pressure has been applied specifically due to the situation in Ukraine.

#### **4. INTERNAL VULNERABILITIES IN FRANCE THAT COULD BE USED BY RUSSIA IN ITS ANTI-UKRAINIAN POLICIES**

Very often it is not clear why Russia wins or loses in France – is it because France is good in defending against foreign influence or just because Russia does its job too bad, or vice versa.

Despite the political competition on issues related to domestic policy, French political elite is very consolidated on the issues of foreign policy and there is an elite-consensus on major foreign policy issues – last presidential campaign was probably the first where the foreign policy represented an issue for debates. Therefore, it is very difficult for Russia to penetrate the establishment. On top of that, the Ministry

of Defense has a significant influence in the Government and as such, a military influence on the foreign policy. Even more, unlike in Germany, the French political elite is less vulnerable to business and pacifist pressure coming from within the society.

A possible vulnerability could be the increasing pressure of the business circles. As presented in the tables below, the Russian-French trade relations are reviving after a serious drop in 2015. Moreover, the 2017 figures, when it comes to Russia's exports to France, have already reached the pre-war level, and the French exports to Russia are also growing slowly but steadily. For Ukraine, the situation is worse in terms of trade with France, which decreased in terms of both exports and imports. One element worth noting is that French investments in Russia, despite sanctions, remained pretty much the same since the war in Ukraine, except for a serious drop in 2017. And finally, the importance of Ukraine in France is negligible in terms of trade – in 2016, Ukraine's share in French trade represented 0.19%, which was also the case in the previous years.

The business is the easiest entry point for Russia in France. The Kremlin is keen to spend a lot of money on various programs, from military and energy to real estate. Some experts noted that the French business circles dealing with Russia became big admirers of Russia (not Putin, but Russia as a country, although sometimes Putin himself is also admired). The main characteristics of the French business dealing with Russia is that it becomes very anti-West, Eurosceptic and flexible in terms of playing by the rules. That is why Russia is cultivating its relations with French business noting that Russia offers great opportunities to earn a lot of money, like Germans do, and if the sanctions were lifted, then French could benefit from it.

<sup>13</sup> *An Ill Wind, How the sale of Mistral warships to Russia is undermining EU arms transfer controls*, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014\\_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede140715briefingsafeworld\\_/sede140715briefingsafeworld\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/sede/dv/sede140715briefingsafeworld_/sede140715briefingsafeworld_en.pdf)

**Table 1.** Imports, exports, investments, and trade share comparing France to Russia and France to Ukraine.<sup>14</sup>

Imports (in USD)

F-France, R-Russia, U-Ukraine

EXPORTS (IN USD)						
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>R to F</b>	7.42B (1.4%)	5.93B (1.9%)	4.84B (.97%)	3.07B (.89%)	4.85B (1.7%)	5.90B (1.7%)
<b>F to R</b>	11.7B (2.1%)	10.2B (1.8%)	8.96B (1.6%)	5.00B (1.0%)	5.41B (1.1%)	5.41B (1.1%)
<b>U to F</b>	549M (.80%)	694M (.99%)	535M (.99%)	498M (1.3%)	458M (1.3%)	425M (.98%)
<b>F to U</b>	1.40B (.25%)	1.27B (.22%)	1.03B (.18%)	652M (.13%)	780M (.16%)	n/a

SUM OF INVESTMENTS (IN USD)						
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>F to R</b>	1.97B	2.12B	2.08B	1.69B	2.02B	854M
<b>R to F</b>	960M	449M	523M	74M	n/a	n/a
<b>F to U</b>	1.51B	1.52B	1.39B	1.31B	1.29B	1.33B
<b>U to F</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

TRADE SHARE						
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>F to R</b>	2.21%	1.96%	1.85%	1.14%	1.10%	n/a
<b>R to F</b>	2.52%	2.25%	1.96%	1.64%	2.85%	n/a
<b>F to U</b>	.18%	.20%	.15%	.13%	.19%	n/a
<b>U to F</b>	1.37%	1.50%	1.60%	1.70%	n/a	2%

<sup>14</sup> Author's own compilation with the support of Diana Glebova. Data sources are European Parliament, OECD, World Bank, and Ukrainian Bureau of Statistics.

One of the goals of the Kremlin is to engage with local actors in order to provide for external legitimization of Russia and spread misleading information or misinformation through local outlets (centers, church, culture, etc.), which may seem to appear more credible for French society.

The Russian Orthodox Church has a significant presence in France and recently a new church and community center has been built in Paris next to the Eiffel Tower, showing Russian might and trying to influence the Russian diaspora counting about 200,000 people. The Russian Center is headed by the former Russian Ambassador to France who served from 2008 to 2017 and has the image of a very influential person. The current Ambassador of Russia in France, Alexey Meshkov, is having quite poor relations with the former Ambassador (Orlov) and there is a sort of competition, which is not necessarily weakening Russia's position in France but is at least fragmenting it. Moreover, the current Russian Ambassador of Russia does not speak French, which is a serious barrier for an Ambassador in France in terms of getting along with the French political elite. Still, as former Ambassador to Italy, Meshkov has a good reputation in building relations with local elites. However, one should note that for Russia, which has so many French speaking diplomats, it was more important to accommodate a former Deputy Minister to a good post, rather than to appoint a person who dealt with France before.

With the expansion of the Russian network of centers in France, one could expect that the Russian influence could increase in the future, especially given that Russia is not challenged by Ukraine in presenting an alternative view, not speaking of other countries. Russia is

“armed” with organizations representing various social and economic layers. Among the most influential organizations are:

- French Coordination Council of Compatriots, a subsidiary of the International Council of Russian Compatriots. Notably, this network relies on the organization “Russkiy Mir”. Also, Moscow Patriarchate has been active in organizing the community.
- The Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, headed by Putin's loyalist Nataliya Narochnitskaya and managed by the British Eurosceptic John Laughland. The main goal of the IDC is to advocate Russia's policies and narrative and defend the Kremlin's line. The IDC is very active and is organizing a lot of events on various issues that reflect the Russian agenda.
- The Franco-Russian Dialogue, an entity aimed at developing economic relations between Russia and France. From the Russian side, oligarch Vladimir Yakunin is Co-President and Thierry Mariani, a former member of the French legislative, co-presides from the French side.
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry of France and Russia, aimed at developing business ties between the two countries and again with the involvement of Vladimir Yakunin and Gennady Timchenko. From the French side, the Chamber is chaired by Emmanuel Quidet.
- There are dozens of other networks or organizations supported by Russia across France. Some of them are ideological and close to certain political parties, others are community and interest based.





While the policy of Russia in France seeks to amplify the problems that exist in the society and therefore influence the debate, Ukraine does not go unnoticed in the Russian narrative. One of the serious arguments, which gets traction among both the French society and a certain part of the political elite, is the corruption in Ukraine. In the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International, Russia is the 29th most corrupt country and Ukraine coming next in line, on 30th place. This argument is exploited in France through asking why a corrupt country like Ukraine should be supported while Russia, which is, in a broad sense, as corrupt as Ukraine, should be sanctioned? This kind of comparison did not really work in 2014, but in 2018, it sounds different, even if Ukraine is still struggling against the Russian aggression. Ukraine had 4 years to reform itself, and the results are modest, according to certain French experts.

Furthermore, there is a serious misunderstanding regarding Kyiv's policy in relation to the occupied territories in the East of Ukraine. French officials, including those dealing with Ukraine, have mentioned that Kyiv's policy regarding the occupied territories is not clear at all. According to them, Ukraine adopted the law on reintegration, which contains everything but reintegration. Moreover, in certain instances, it seems like Kyiv is not willing to implement the Minsk Agreements and is fueling the situation in the East of Ukraine in order to avoid the implementation of the political agenda.

Another issue that has the potential to "explode" and to be taken on board of Russian narrative is the corruption scandal regarding the sale of Ukrainian passports. French officials

(along with their Belgian counterparts) seem very concerned about the issue, and if Ukraine will not do damage control, presenting information on how they dealt with the issue, as well as the guarantees that this "scheme" is not possible anymore, this might become a serious issue on the bilateral agenda.

Also, the French side warned that it is not advisable "to call DC" if Kyiv wants to fix an issue in Paris. France prefers to discuss issues bilaterally or within the EU, and the US will not help, especially with the current relations between the US President and the key countries in the EU.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UKRAINE'S

#### JOINT ACTIONS WITH FRANCE AND OTHER PARTNERS TO COUNTER COMMON THREATS POSED BY RUSSIA

- 1 Ukraine could make better use of its relations with member states present in NATO and the EU in order to discuss issues of concern in a particular country, for instance France, not by avoiding the involvement of France, but by creating “thematic” panels with the involvement of France and other interested states.
- 2 Ukraine has recently developed a comprehensive strategy for countering Russian misinformation. To some extent, France could benefit from this Ukrainian “know-how”. Concrete steps could be made in this area, for instance, through fostering French-Ukrainian cooperation in the legislative sphere, as parliaments of both countries have developed legislation in countering foreign media influence.
- 3 A similar kind of cooperation could be established between Ukrainian and French media associations. After identifying French journalists writing on Ukraine, Ukrainian media associations (such as Ukraine Crisis Media Center) could propose concrete measures to their French counterparts: field visits, workshops, or joint projects.
- 4 Russian information war against Ukraine mostly relies in France on the fact that Ukraine is not well-known to the French public. Further branding Ukraine in France, for instance, by developing already existing events (e.g. Ukrainian Film Festival), could be an option.
- 5 A very important area of promotion in France is the cultural dimension. Russian narrative on Ukraine has been successful because French people are more familiar with Russia and its culture. There is a certain spill-over effect on political issues, which is generated by the cultural events. Ukraine has a rich culture and a lot to present to the French public. Also, the gastronomy topic – cuisine and culinary culture – is an important way to propel Ukraine’s image in France.
- 6 Cyber security and cooperation on the digital agenda could be one of the most promising perspectives of cooperation between France and Ukraine, given the experience of both countries in defending against Russian cyber-attacks, with a particular accent on the elections.
- 7 The military cooperation in the area of hybrid threats, but also conventional warfare could be an issue of interest between France and Ukraine. France has been traditionally present on the African continent in various formats. One potential avenue to explore is the participation of Ukrainian soldiers in the peacekeeping mission in Mali. This recommendation has been constantly pushed by the NEC and is now implemented with Ukraine sending 20 servicemen to join the UN stabilization mission in Mali.
- 8 The media education project developed in France for many years has been a positive example of preparing the society to become resilient against fake



news and misinformation. Ukraine also has a great experience accumulated during the last four years. Both sides could share and develop a program on cooperation, including at the governmental level.

## 5.2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UKRAINE

1 French experts see Ukraine trying to play the great power without great power's resources. Therefore, what Ukraine needs to employ is smart power instead of simulating great power: picking easy targets and using opponents' disadvantages to its advantage, as well as avoiding giving reasons for criticism to the opponents. For instance, Russia has "raided" Ukrainian history and presents itself as the real descendent of the Kyivan Rus with Anna of Kyiv<sup>15</sup> being a "Russian" queen. Ukraine has all instruments in countering this narrative.

2 Ukraine gives Russia a lot of room for maneuver in France. Ukraine needs to focus on multipliers of their message – students, diaspora, business, culture, cuisine, etc. It also needs an active Ambassador who speaks French and is public and outspoken. Ukraine should consider the low-level diplomacy, e.g. university events, as students have a lot of energy and a way to use that energy needs to be put in motion. After culture,

it is important to develop a culinary track, which is unconventional, but a very effective and understandable entry point to France.

3 It is important to understand that there are no political shortcuts in France if one does not work on economic and cultural diplomacy. The messages like "we defend France from Russia" do not help in France; on the contrary, they irritate French public and officials. Therefore, there is no need to underline that France "owes" something to Ukraine because of the Ukrainian resistance against Russia.

4 Joint business projects play a very important role, and once Ukraine is able to offer business opportunities to French companies, it will seriously anchor on the French agenda. So far, the signals received from the French partners on the conditions for French business are mixed. Many French companies still complain on the pressure from state institutions in Ukraine and even "raid attacks". The big plans of Engie and Alstom to enter Ukraine have to be unconditionally supported by the Ukrainian officials.

5 Ukraine should put more efforts to limit damage in the case of the corruption scandal related to the selling of Ukrainian passports to people from Middle East. French Government has been on alert in the last years and any illicit "help" to potentially dangerous people willing to travel to the EU and France is a serious issue on the bilateral agenda. So far, the French side has been dissatisfied with the measures taken by

<sup>15</sup> We acknowledge the French spelling "Anne de Kiev". However, we use the Ukrainian rules for transliteration for the purpose of this paper.

their Ukrainian counterparts in ensuring there is not risk related to “passport selling”.

6 Ukraine needs to identify the individuals who have been part of Macron’s team and have been affected by the cyber-attack. These people are very irritated by Russia and are ready to take on limiting Russia’s influence or countering Russian initiatives; however, these people need to be entertained in certain formats, which Ukraine could propose. Aside from that, there are people in French politics who are seen as Ukraine-friendly, e.g. Valeria Faur Muntean, the head of French-Ukrainian parliamentary group who has Ukrainian origins, which is a significant advantage, since she understands the challenges faced by Ukraine.

7 Nobody understands better than Ukraine in which areas Russia is trying to influence the narrative or agenda in France and other EU countries. Ukraine could monitor and communicate on the possible risks and threats. A STRATCOM unit taking care of the above should be established. It is not necessary that the STRATCOM is associated with the Embassy of Ukraine in France. Actually, it is better if it is separate and independent, including communication through backchannel diplomacy. The policy of the STRATCOM should be the 4R: Reveal, React, Ridicule, Repeat.

8 Finally, Kyiv needs to make sure everyone understands its policy towards the occupied territories in the East of Ukraine and its blueprint for reintegration and implementation of

the Minsk Agreements. The fact that the officials in France are confused about the real intentions of Ukraine in regard to the occupied territories is a serious shortcoming in the communication. Also, the issue of fight against corruption and its results should be better emphasized, so that the French do not put Ukraine and Russia on the same page.

9 Even if the leadership in the Normandy Format has been on the side of Germany, France could potentially become the new leader in the next years. The weakening position of Chancellor Merkel and her announcement to leave public office after the end of her mandate (or even earlier if she loses control in the party) will automatically make France the leader of the Normandy Format, given the experience of President Macron. Therefore, France should be seen as equally important for the continuation of the Normandy Format and for sustainability of the sanctions policy.