

“Losing Allies, but Doubling Down: Russian Authoritarian Influence after the Invasion of Ukraine”

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Summary

A. Russia may be at an inflection point: its influence operations are not sufficiently effective and its military efforts in Ukraine are proving too costly and counterproductive. In recent years, Russia has been expanding its authoritarian playbook in an effort to undermine European states supporting Ukraine. These tactics have become more aggressive and urgent, driven by the war and the loss of autocratic allies, and are fixated on securing Russia’s immediate neighborhood and silencing dissent elsewhere in the world.

B. Key Trends in Russian Foreign Authoritarian Influence:

1. Russia’s attempts to co-opt European elections have grown in scale and technological sophistication. The operations now span a wider social media ecosystem and increasingly use AI tools to tailor messaging to local contexts and younger audiences.
2. Russia has stepped up investments in state media, which collectively maintain around 60 bureaus around the world. These bureaus are promoting Russian priorities abroad through content-sharing partnerships that allow them to plant their favored narratives in local and regional media throughout the Global South.
3. The country has also diversified and intensified its efforts to find and silence dissidents abroad. These efforts include weaponizing Interpol red notices, hiring intermediaries to carry out attacks or assassinations, and providing allied governments with the tools to surveil dissidents and their families.

C. Projected Trends and Democratic Vulnerabilities for 26-30:

1. Russia will continue to lose autocratic allies, which will intensify its drive to influence its neighbors through election interference and the use of organized crime networks to enact political violence.
2. Moscow will continue to expand its influence in the Global South through partnerships with local and regional media.
3. The Kremlin will scale up its attacks on Russian dissidents and media abroad as the population of Russians in exile grows.

Introduction: Authoritarian Influence amid Global Uncertainty

For over two decades, the Russian regime has positioned itself as the principal revisionist challenger to the rules-based international order and its associated democratic norms and practices. Russian influence strategies rest on Moscow’s long-held claim that promotion of democracy is a cover for geopolitical pressure, that democracy assistance serves as a pretext for

destabilizing regime change, and that support for civil society constitutes unwarranted interference in the sovereign affairs and security of its partners.¹

Moscow has justified its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as an attempt to counter the encroachment of this international order, and particularly the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), arguing that the West applies its principles selectively and hypocritically.² The war—and its resolution on terms favorable to the Kremlin—remains Moscow's greatest foreign policy priority and a driver of its aggressive and potent tactics. This objective shapes the targeting logic, urgency, and resource allocation behind nearly every influence activity examined below.³

The 2024 U.S. elections, the prospect of a more transactional and constructive Russian relationship with Washington, and mixed international pushback against Russian aggression have not yielded a quick peace agreement on Moscow's preferred terms. Moreover, the Russian regime is confronting the loss of a string of autocratic allies that it had carefully cultivated over decades as part of its global revisionist strategy. The successful U.S. military operation in January 2026, in which Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro was seized and rendered to the United States to stand trial on drug-trafficking charges, was a striking demonstration of the political precarity of Moscow's reliance on autocratic partners and clients.⁴

This essay makes the case that the Kremlin's broader authoritarian playbook—which spans foreign agent laws, Interpol abuse, social media campaigns, globally oriented state media outlets, and the intimidation of civil society—has expanded in scale and sophistication around the world in recent years. The Russian regime's most assertive tactics are concentrated against European states that it views as its principal adversaries in Ukraine, and include election interference as well as transnational repression against exiled Russian war critics and regime opponents. These escalations have occurred amid complex global crosscurrents that are largely outside Moscow's control. The Kremlin mostly watched from the sidelines while a series of regime collapses eroded its network of autocratic allies, for instance, yet the contraction of prodemocracy global media services provided an unexpected boon.

The Russian leadership may now face an inflection point in its strategy: its soft- and sharp-power efforts are not sufficiently effective, and its hard-power enterprise in Ukraine is proving too costly and counterproductive.

The rest of this report explores the evolving Russian approach in three tactical areas: electoral interference and democratic subversion, Russian media infrastructure and autocratic narratives in the Global South, and the expanding campaign of transnational repression against the Russian exile community in Europe. In each area, Moscow's tactics have notably grown more forceful and belligerent, while its fixation on the war in Ukraine has given its efforts an increasing urgency. The regime is likely to pivot further toward a more aggressive, technologically sophisticated strategy centered on securing its immediate neighborhood, contesting the narratives of its political foes through propaganda, and silencing dissent elsewhere in the world.

Electoral Interference: Integrated Tactics Aimed at Europe

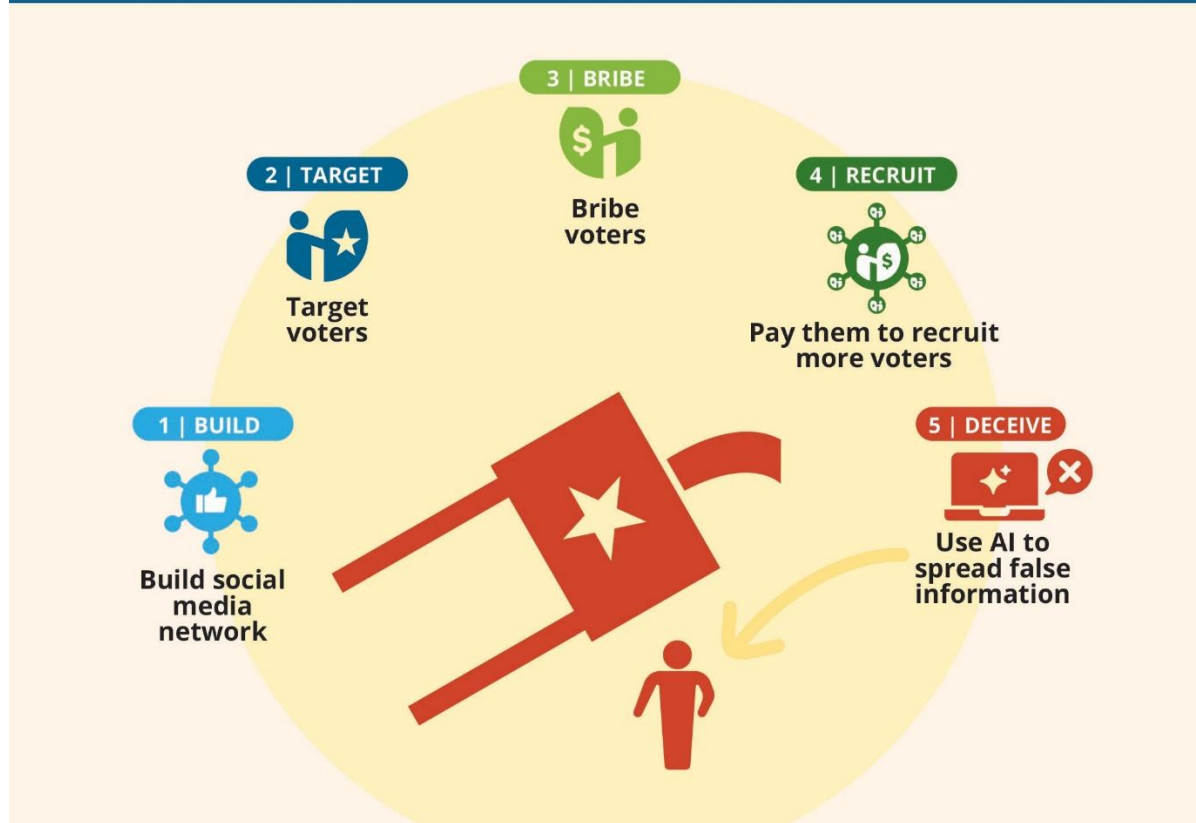
Moscow's election interference methods once focused on centralized troll-farm operations that manufactured divisive content for Facebook and Twitter, but they have developed over the past 10 years to incorporate more diffuse and technologically advanced campaigns.⁵ The operations now span a wider social media ecosystem—including TikTok and other short-form video platforms—and increasingly use artificial intelligence (AI) tools to tailor messaging to local contexts and younger audiences.⁶

In 2024, for example, Moscow launched perhaps its most ambitious interference operation of the decade, targeting Moldova's October presidential election and a concurrent European Union (EU) accession referendum with the goal of derailing President Maia Sandu's pro-European agenda.⁷ The Russian campaign was remarkable for its scale and directness. Moldovan police accused Ilan Shor—a former Moldovan politician who had been convicted in the 2014 “billion-dollar theft” banking scandal and was later sanctioned by the EU, the United Kingdom, and the United States—of funneling at least \$39 million into the country from a Russian bank as part of a large-scale interference and vote-buying operation.⁸ The effort reportedly used recruitment networks based on the Telegram messaging platform and centered geographically in the autonomous ethnic minority region of Gagauzia to deliver cash and Russian Mir payment cards to as many as 130,000 voters, representing approximately 10 percent of the Moldovan electorate.⁹

The Moldova operation was also analytically significant due to its multimodal character. In addition to the payments, a coordinated information manipulation campaign deployed deepfake audio and recruited Moldovans to produce false AI-generated news stories, including claims that the government planned to falsify election results and that Sandu was linked to child trafficking.¹⁰ The Russian Orthodox Church amplified this anti-Sandu and anti-EU messaging.¹¹ Even if Moldova's particular vulnerabilities, including the separatist-ruled, Russian-occupied territory of Transnistria and Gagauzia's pro-Moscow orientation, created unusually favorable conditions for such campaigns, the episode illustrated the Russian regime's capacity to integrate digital propaganda, covert financing, and vote-buying into a single influence operation.

Nevertheless, the operation ultimately failed. The referendum passed by a margin of just 0.7 percent, Sandu decisively won reelection with 55 percent of the vote in a November 2024 runoff, and her Party of Action and Solidarity retained its majority in September 2025 parliamentary elections. The interference was followed by a set of law enforcement actions, with a Gagauz official convicted in August 2025 of funneling illicit Russian funds.¹² Greece then extradited Vladimir Plahotniuc, a powerful oligarch and former Moldovan politician who had fled after being implicated in the \$1 billion bank-fraud scandal of 2014.¹³ Overall, Moscow's most direct electoral intervention in a decade produced a visible defeat and a loss of political influence.

Russia's Fully Integrated Election Interference Strategy



A parallel case in Georgia shows what Moscow can accomplish when working in partnership with an authoritarian-aligned domestic government to achieve similar antidemocratic goals. Once viewed as a reliably pro-Western state, Georgia has increasingly drifted toward Moscow under the governance of the ruling Georgian Dream party, whose leadership has adopted many of the repressive tactics and laws developed by the Kremlin, including a Russian-style “foreign agents” law enacted in June 2024.¹⁴ In the October 2024 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream retained its majority amid allegations of fraud, intimidation, and Russian-manipulated social media. Georgian President Salomé Zourabichvili, an independent, refused to recognize the results, saying they had been falsified as part of a “Russian special operation.”¹⁵ In the run-up to the balloting, Russian-backed propagandists had spread claims across social media that the United States and the West were preparing violent protests and even a coup in the event of a Georgian Dream victory.¹⁶

After the Georgian government announced in late November 2024 that it would suspend EU accession talks until 2028, mass protests did erupt across Tbilisi and other cities. Authorities cracked down in response, with hundreds of arrests reported.¹⁷ In early 2025, the EU suspended parts of its visa-facilitation agreement affecting travel for Georgian diplomats and officials.¹⁸ The anticorruption watchdog Transparency International later found that approximately 700 civil servants had been fired for supporting the protests.¹⁹ Georgia’s local elections a year later

highlighted another tactic borrowed from Moscow, as the Georgian Dream government invited fake or biased international election observers to lend legitimacy to the outcome.²⁰

The Georgian case suggests that in countries where a friendly domestic government is in place, Moscow does not need the elaborate financial and digital infrastructure it deployed in Moldova. Instead it can work through incumbent elites and exploit administrative resources to suppress opposition, manage media coverage, and insulate electoral outcomes from external scrutiny and accountability.²¹

Information Warfare in the Global South: Old Wine in New Bottles

Outside of Europe, Russian authoritarian influence efforts are concentrated mostly on shaping the information environment, engaging with local partners, and spreading AI-generated content. Moscow's global media and information operations have expanded considerably over the past decade. Despite major economic strains associated with the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has chosen to increase its spending on foreign propaganda. The 2026 draft federal budget proposed to raise allocations for mass media and propaganda by 6.6 percent, to a record 146 billion rubles (\$1.78 billion), including \$390 million for the global television outlet RT (Russia Today).²²

Although Europe remains a primary focus, Africa and Latin America are priority regions in the Global South, where the Kremlin seeks to erode international support for Ukraine, extract resources, build authoritarian partnerships, and position Russia as a champion of the postcolonial world and anti-U.S. movements. Russian state media—principally RT, Sputnik, and the news service TASS—collectively maintain at least 58 bureaus worldwide; offer dedicated channels in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish; and produce content in many other languages.²³



Photo Credit: Kevin Sheives

Critically, the narratives generated by these state-sponsored Russian outlets are amplified within local media ecosystems, through either formal content-sharing agreements—numbering at least 99 globally—or informal reproduction.²⁴ In Africa, local stations and networks now regularly rebroadcast RT and Sputnik packages or partner with Russian-aligned channels like Afrique Média.²⁵ Moscow's "African Initiative" project was launched in 2023 in Mali and presented as a journalism school and independent news agency; it trains local journalists and funnels Kremlin-friendly content into national and regional media environments.²⁶ In

Latin America, RT and Sputnik collaborate with the Venezuela-based TeleSUR and the Iran-backed HispanTV, including by sharing offices and anti-U.S. editorial outlooks.²⁷ Recent analysis has shown how local platforms in Mexico and Brazil reproduce Russian and Cuban state media content, often stripped of attribution.²⁸

In 2025, the United States undertook dramatic changes to its foreign policy, and Moscow’s autocratic allies in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America faced intense domestic and foreign pressures. To analyze whether Russian narratives had thematically adjusted during this period of change, we conducted original content analysis on a sample of 101 news stories from January through December 2025, drawn from RT, Sputnik, and affiliated local outlets, including regional amplifiers and Russian embassies’ social media accounts.²⁹ Each item was coded for prominent themes in Russian messaging that typically promote antidemocratic interests, such as support for host-country sovereignty against Western interference, accusations of U.S. hypocrisy, and critiques of U.S. sanctions policy.³⁰ Such narrative themes are used to bolster local authoritarians in the face of international criticism and stigmatize civil society groups that receive foreign funding. While not a comprehensive survey, the sample was sufficient to identify prominent thematic patterns and regional variation.

Top Russian Narratives in African and Latin American News Stories

Russia’s propaganda in the Global South is not one-size-fits-all. State media and their allies push different narratives depending on the regional context.

In **Africa**, for instance, their content strategy focuses on establishing **Russia** as a more **reliable and powerful ally** than many Western countries. While in **Latin America**, rather than promoting Russia, their content focuses on stoking sentiment more clearly directed towards the **United States’ role in Latin America**.

AFRICA TOP THEMES



LATIN AMERICA TOP THEMES



Source: Based on author’s analysis of 101 news stories (53 Africa-focused, 48 Latin America-focused) from January–December 2025 drawn from Russian state media and affiliated local outlets, as well as Russian embassy social media accounts.

The analysis revealed distinct regional messaging strategies. In Africa, Russian narratives consistently emphasized “positive authoritarianism,” with about half of the news stories framing

Russia as a reliable security partner and a stabilizing guarantor of host-country sovereignty among postcoup military regimes, as well as “multipolar” perspectives that present non-Western development paths as more desirable than Western-backed lending institutions and development models. Anti-French and anticolonial references were present in over 42 percent of the African news stories. Notably, despite the fact that the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was previously a major target of Kremlin-backed conspiracy theories, Russian outlets’ Africa coverage contained almost no mentions of the agency and its closure after August 2025, or of the public health consequences of the withdrawal of U.S. humanitarian aid, reinforcing the finding that Russian regional messaging prioritized promotion of Moscow’s partnerships with African autocratic governments over delegitimization of the United States per se.³¹

Latin American content, however, reflects a fundamentally different approach, directly criticizing U.S. policy and instruments rather than mentioning Russia and its activities. Over a third of the Latin America items drew attention to sanctions abuse (34 percent), U.S. militarism (33 percent), or the criminality-as-pretext themes (35 percent) that cast American counternarcotics operations as illegitimate forms of aggression. Events related to Venezuela were featured in 40 percent of all regional stories, with coverage surging in final four months of the year.

Taken together, these findings point to a strategic posture best described as old wine in an expanding collection of new bottles. The narratives themselves—Russia as a stabilizing force that opposes European colonialism in Africa, and criticism of U.S. imperialism in Latin America—are durable and largely unchanged. But Moscow continues to expand its media infrastructure as it opens more bureaus, concludes more content-sharing agreements, establishes local media partnerships, and cultivates aligned regional outlets.³² Even as the Ukraine war drains the Russian federal budget, the Kremlin has continued to increase investments in RT and its affiliated networks,³³ a signal that the regime views this global apparatus as cost-effective and its Global South messaging as a strategic priority.

One might expect a volatile global environment to have prompted a rethink of the Kremlin’s Global South strategy. Instead, the Russian leadership has chosen to scale up its worldwide propaganda apparatus, confident that the existing strategy has worked and warrants an even greater infusion of resources.

Transnational Repression: New Targets, New Perpetrators, and New Tools

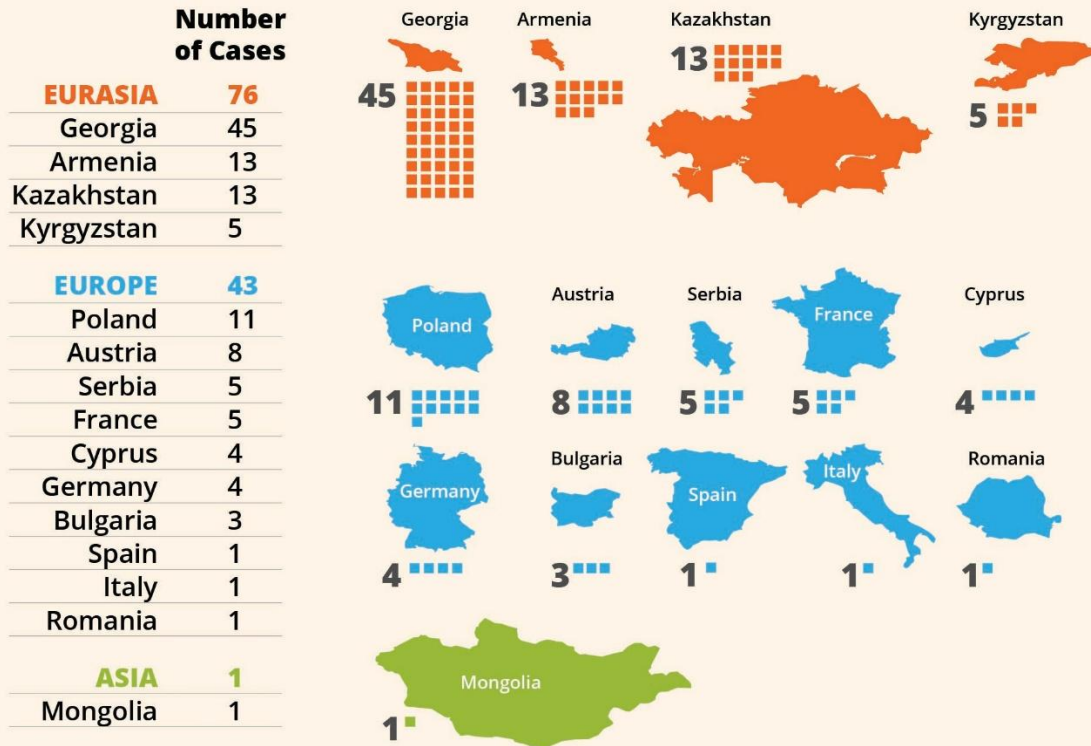
Moscow’s transnational repression operations now reach a wider set of targets, draw on a broader array of state-affiliated perpetrators, and exploit more authoritarian-friendly technologies than ever before. Freedom House’s 2014–25 dataset attributes 100 physical incidents of transnational repression to the Russian regime, ranking it third globally.³⁴ The Kremlin is particularly notable for the prominent role that assassinations play in its tactics; of 60 such cases in Freedom House’s 2014–24 dataset, 13 are attributed to Moscow.³⁵

Since February 2022, Russian authorities have escalated their targeting of political dissidents, independent journalists, and civil society activists who fled the country following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian human rights project OVD-Info estimates that more than

900,000 Russians have left since the invasion, with most initially moving to visa-free destinations in the former Soviet region.³⁶ In response, Russian security services have leveraged long-standing bilateral relationships, extradition arrangements, and data-sharing agreements to pressure host-country counterparts into surveilling, detaining, and even repatriating these exiles.³⁷ For example, between 2022 and 2024, at least seven Russian dissidents were arrested in Kazakhstan and four in Kyrgyzstan;³⁸ in 2026, the pace of extraditions increased, with Kazakhstani authorities granting four extradition requests to Russia, including for an activist who had volunteered with the organization of late Russian opposition leader Aleksey Navalny.³⁹ In June 2023, Kyrgyzstan's government—with Russian guidance—introduced a facial recognition system that has since been used to identify Russian antiwar dissidents and activists.⁴⁰

Other exiles have relocated to EU member states, which has tested the capacity of European democracies to contend with a sustained campaign of transnational repression. In practice, the Russian regime employs a diverse toolkit to target exile communities residing in liberal democracies, ranging from legal harassment to direct lethal violence or intimidation by contracted agents.⁴¹ Physical attacks remain a key part of the repressive apparatus.⁴² In 2023, German police launched investigations into the possible poisoning of two Russian exiles who participated in a dissident meeting in Berlin.⁴³ In Spain, a Russian helicopter pilot who had defected to Ukraine was shot six times and killed in February 2024.⁴⁴

Russian TNR Primarily Targets Its Neighbors (2014-2025)



Source: "Transnational Repression by the Russian Federation: Threats, Tendencies, Solutions," OVD-Info, May 2025, <https://reports.ovd.info/en/transnational-repression-russian-federation-threats-tendencies-solutions>.

Note: The dataset tracks cases that took place between 2014-2025. Some cases involve multiple countries, as a result totals may exceed overall count.

Exiles are not the only victims of Moscow's cross-border violence. Ukrainian journalist and media commentator Dmytro Gordon was the target of two separate Federal Security Service (FSB) assassination plots, disclosed by Ukrainian authorities in June 2025.⁴⁵ The campaign has also expanded to those directly supporting Ukraine's defense. German and American intelligence services disrupted a plot by Russia's military intelligence agency, known as the GRU, to assassinate the chief executive of the German firm Rheinmetall, a major supplier of weapons to Kyiv.⁴⁶

Moscow's increasing reliance on proxies in the European theater likely reflects a structural shift. As European states have expelled more than 750 Russian diplomats since 2022, the capacity of Russian intelligence services to operate under official cover on EU soil has been sharply reduced.⁴⁷ This has driven the rise of what Nate Schenkkan has described as a "gig economy" model of transnational repression, in which operations are outsourced on a freelance basis to local or third-country proxies recruited through online channels.⁴⁸ For example, British police disrupted a Bulgarian organized crime network that had been working on behalf of the GRU to conduct surveillance and plot attacks against Russian dissidents in the United Kingdom. GRU

Unit 29155 has since been sanctioned by both the EU and London for assassination attempts and other destabilization activities.⁴⁹

Beyond physical attacks and proxy operations in host countries, Moscow has expanded its use of coercion-by-proxy since 2022; Russian security services now routinely contact the Russia-based families of exiles as a means of intimidation. Russian authorities have also increased efforts to infiltrate antiwar and opposition activist groups, surveilling both online and offline activities to identify and intimidate diaspora members.⁵⁰ While harder to quantify than physical attacks, these “everyday” forms of transnational repression may have the most significant cumulative impact, leading to self-censorship, social withdrawal, and disengagement from civic and political life across the exile community.⁵¹

In addition, the Russian leadership has increasingly leveraged legal and administrative channels to pursue its critics abroad. The Kremlin has extended the extraterritorial reach of its domestic judicial system to regularly conduct criminal prosecutions in absentia and to issue international arrest warrants. New batch designations of “undesirable organizations,” affecting both groups and individuals, effectively function as tools of transnational harassment.⁵² By late 2025, Russian courts had convicted at least a dozen exiled journalists and opposition figures in absentia, often handing down multiyear prison terms that would be enforced if the individuals returned to Russia.⁵³ According to OVD-Info, the combined list of “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” includes at least 1,525 individuals and organizations, 1,062 of which had been added since 2022, with 2025 marking the biggest single-year expansion (331 additions).⁵⁴ Legislative changes in 2024–25 further tightened restrictions on those listed, allowed for the confiscation of their property, and simplified the process of opening criminal cases for alleged violations of the relevant laws’ reporting and labeling requirements.⁵⁵

Moscow has also exploited international mechanisms that are designed for legitimate law enforcement cooperation. Leaked Interpol data indicate that, as of September 2024, Russia maintained 4,817 active Interpol Red Notices, more than any other country.⁵⁶ Reviews conducted by the United Nations and Freedom House revealed that many of the Russian cases pursued across borders involve journalists, opposition figures, and activists who were inappropriately charged with “extremism” or “terrorism.”⁵⁷ The European Parliament’s 2026 study on transnational repression found that European host states too often accept origin-state claims that individuals are “extremists” or “terrorists,” leading to unlawful deportations that disproportionately affect lower-profile individuals who lack resources for high-quality legal representation.⁵⁸

Finally, Russian authorities have built a less visible but highly consequential enabler of transnational repression by exporting digital surveillance and censorship technologies. Beginning in April 2024, the Kremlin actively promoted Russian cybersecurity tools among security services around the world.⁵⁹ These include lawful interception systems similar to Russia’s domestic System for Operative Investigative Activities (SORM), which capture telephone and internet metadata and content; they include social media monitoring capabilities that can track subscriber metadata and personal information on messaging platforms, enabling the identification of protesters and political activists.⁶⁰ The watchdog Recorded Future has named at least 15 telecommunications companies in Central Asia and Latin America as likely customers of

Russian SORM providers, including Kazakhtelecom in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyztelecom and MegaCom in Kyrgyzstan.⁶¹

Conclusion

The future of Moscow's authoritarian influence in the world seems increasingly dependent on its pressing priority of ending the war in Ukraine on favorable terms and disrupting international support for Kyiv and the sanctions regime. This explains the Kremlin's more aggressive information tactics in Europe, designed to undermine transatlantic unity and aid for Ukraine's defense, as well as its transnational targeting of dissidents in the diaspora and exile communities. The pivotal importance of Ukraine also accounts for the continued expansion of Russian channels for information operations across the Global South, where Moscow seeks to secure UN votes, erode sanctions support, and frame the war as a Western imperialist proxy conflict. But while some Kremlin strategists may have initially welcomed a new U.S. administration that is willing to break with traditional policy priorities regarding the transatlantic alliance or foreign assistance, the events of 2025 and early 2026 have left Moscow in an increasingly challenging global position despite its significant investments in authoritarian influence activities.

What is the Russian leadership likely to do next? How might the dynamics described above play out over the next three to five years?

Projecting Trends in 2026–30

Russia's damaging loss of autocratic allies will continue. Since late 2024, Moscow has witnessed the fall or degradation of client regimes in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, which has exposed the fragility of a global strategy built on personal ties with autocratic leaders. To date, Russian officials and media have compartmentalized their reactions, focusing on separate analyses of the fallout from each incident. The Communist Party regime in Cuba, Moscow's oldest Western Hemisphere client, now faces a deepening economic crisis caused by energy sanctions and U.S. pressure. Iran's regime faces even more intense difficulties.

The Kremlin's loss of global allies will intensify its drive to secure influence in Russia's immediate neighborhood. As its network of distant autocratic partners weakens or collapses, Moscow is likely to double down on maintaining control in the states it considers strategically essential, particularly in the nearby South Caucasus, Central Asia, Belarus, and Moldova. Its priority will be to prevent additional defections close to home by whatever means necessary.

Moscow's election interference and social media operations will continue to integrate financial support, local microtargeting, and AI-generated content. The Moldovan case showed that Russian authorities have moved well beyond the clumsy social media influence campaigns of a decade ago. Their toolkit has demonstrably expanded. Policymakers, civic watchdogs, independent media, and authentic election observers must develop frameworks capable of both detecting and countering this more potent Russian use of digital technologies.

Subversive Russian operations in Europe will incorporate more aggressive paramilitary and criminal tactics. The outsourcing of extraterritorial operations to organized crime networks and

contractors indicates that Moscow’s activities on European soil have escalated into a sustained pattern of political violence, far surpassing older interference campaigns that were largely limited to manipulation of the information space. The legal frameworks of democratic states may struggle to effectively counter these new measures.

Russian narratives in the Global South will continue to find politically aligned partners and receptive audiences. Despite Moscow’s recent geopolitical losses, its global influence operations are likely to increase in scope and potency. They have been relatively inexpensive to date and achieve many of the Kremlin’s narrative objectives in the affected regions. The contraction of independent and democratically funded media outlets has created structural conditions that favor Russian messaging. The Russian regime’s expanding network of local media bureaus and partners is embedding its content in ways that will be difficult to detect or disentangle.

Moscow’s transnational repression campaign will continue to scale up, driven by the growth in the Russian exile population. The Kremlin continues to face its largest diaspora challenge in a century. Civic organizations and democratic governments that support Russian dissidents should anticipate escalating threats, surveillance, and both digital and physical infiltration of exile and diaspora communities.

Moscow will continue to block, counter, and stigmatize independent media in exile. The independent Russian journalists and media organizations that have relocated to Europe are conducting important investigations and disseminating news and analysis that are unavailable elsewhere. This makes them vulnerable targets of—and some of the most effective counterweights to—Moscow’s transnational repression campaign. Sustaining these journalists and outlets through fellowships, start-up funding, and support for investigative projects should be a top priority for democratic donors.

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² Cooley, “Authoritarianism Goes Global”; Siegle, *Winning the Battle of Ideas*.

³ Hannah Notte, *We Shall Outlast Them: Putin’s Global Campaign to Defeat the West* (W. W. Norton, 2026 forthcoming).

⁴ Michael Kimmage and Hannah Notte, “The Limits of Russian Power: Why Putin Isn’t Thriving in Trump’s Anarchic World,” *Foreign Affairs*, 5 February 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/limits-russian-power>.

⁵ Darren L. Linvill et al., “‘THE RUSSIANS ARE HACKING MY BRAIN!’—Investigating Russia’s Internet Research Agency Twitter Tactics During the 2016 United States Presidential Campaign,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 99 (October 2019): 292–300, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.05.027>; Adam Badawy et al., “Characterizing the 2016 Russian IRA Influence Campaign,” *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 9, no. 1 (2019): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-019-0578-6>.

⁶ User engagement with Russian state media on TikTok more than doubled in early 2024 compared with 2023. See Valerie Wirtschafter, “Tracing the Rise of Russian State Media on TikTok,” Brookings Institution, 2 May 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tracing-the-rise-of-russian-state-media-on-tiktok/>.

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²⁹ This content analysis focused on 101 randomly selected news stories, official communications, and secondary sources that amplified or republished Russian state media content. The selected content was published between January and December 2025. The sample is roughly divided between Africa-focused (n=53) and Latin America-focused (n=48) content. Primary sources include RT (Global, Español, and Français editions) and Sputnik (Global, Afrique, Mundo, and Brazil editions). Official sources include social media communications from Russian embassies in the Central African Republic, Mali, Cuba, Brazil, Venezuela, Ethiopia, and Argentina. Secondary sources include regional outlets like Afrique Média TV, Maliweb, *La Jornada*, and TeleSUR.

³⁰ Each news story was coded for the presence or absence of thematic categories organized into three tiers: Africa-specific themes, Latin America-specific themes, and universal themes. The Africa tier included seven categories, such as anti-French/anti-Western influence narratives, Russia as a security partner, and multipolarity and Western decline. There were eight Latin America-specific themes, including U.S. militarism and aggression, BRICS and multipolarity, and regime change and intervention. The six universal themes included 2025 U.S. foreign policy shifts, “transactional” diplomacy, and U.S. hypocrisy. Each thematic category contained multiple variants with specific operational definitions to ensure consistency. Where applicable, news items could be coded for multiple themes.

³¹ When the administration moved to shutter USAID in February 2025, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova declared that “the only thing we take a certain satisfaction from is that everything we said turned out to be true,” describing the agency as “a machine for interfering in internal affairs, a mechanism for changing regimes.” “Russia Welcomes USAID Cuts, Calls Agency ‘Machine for Interfering,’” *Moscow Times*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/02/06/russia-welcomes-usaid-cuts-calls-agency-machine-for-interfering-a87895>.

³² Maria Abi-Habib, “Russian Disinformation Comes to Mexico, Seeking to Rupture U.S. Ties,” *New York Times*, 24 November 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/24/world/americas/russia-disinformation-mexico.html>; “Nicaragua: A Latin American Hotspot for Russian Propaganda,” Reporters Without Borders, 25 September 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/nicaragua-latin-american-hotspot-russian-propaganda>; Douglas Farah and Román D. Ortiz, *Russian Influence Campaigns in Latin America* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, October 2023), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y3_P31-PURL-gpo222377/pdf/GOVPUB-Y3_P31-PURL-gpo222377.pdf.

³³ Langford, “Kremlin Pours Record Sum into State Propaganda.”

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³⁵ Nate Schenkkan et al., *Perpetrators and Methods of Transnational Repression and Possible Counter Strategies* (Brussels: European Parliament, January 2026), 26, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2026/775286/EXAS_STU\(2026\)775286_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2026/775286/EXAS_STU(2026)775286_EN.pdf).

³⁶ “Transnational Repression by the Russian Federation: Threats, Tendencies, Solutions,” OVD-Info, May 2025, <https://reports.ovd.info/en/transnational-repression-russian-federation-threats-tendencies-solutions>. For details on migration destination by country and estimated numbers, see also Margarita Zavadskaya, “The War-Induced Exodus from Russia: A Security Problem or Convenient Bogey?,” Finnish Institute of International Affairs, March 2023, https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/bp358_margarita_war-induced-exodus-from-russia.pdf.

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