



## HYBRID THREATS AND THE ROLE OF THE FAR RIGHT

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On 16 December 2024, the Council of the European Union decided for the first time to sanction a number of individuals and entities as a response to Russian “hybrid activities of various kinds, including the use of coordinated information manipulation and interference.” (Council of the EU 2024) The malicious activities invoked in the decision mainly relate to disinformation and misinformation campaigns in relation to the war in Ukraine but also include espionage and hate crimes such as the deliberate painting of Stars of David on the streets of Paris in October 2023. Russia’s hybrid war against the EU is not limited to misinformation, disinformation and low-level violence, but has also included sabotage and cyberattacks, as documented in detail in the press. The recent incident whereby power and internet cables were cut in the Baltic Sea by an anchor of a Russia-linked tanker (Bockmann 2024; Rasmussen and Kauranen 2025) is only one example. NATO officials estimate that such attacks have reached levels never seen before, along with numerous foiled plots (Clark

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2024). In July 2024, two parcel bombs were detonated—one in a DHL plane in Leipzig and another in a warehouse near Birmingham—while several arson attacks were registered in the UK, Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania and Latvia (Kayali et al. 2024). Some officials would go as far as to call

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these attacks acts of terrorism (ibid.), in what appears to be an all-out war on several fronts.

In the background of this strategic situation in Europe, the recent advances of far-right parties in several key EU members become particularly relevant, especially considering their neutral or even positive attitudes towards Russia. While Hungary repeatedly opposed EU sanctions against Russia in the context of its aggression war in Ukraine, far-right parties in Austria and Germany consistently argue for a ‘neutral’ approach towards the war or even against their countries’ support for Ukraine (Hasselbach C. 2024; Lindorfer and Gebhart 2024). Russian overt and covert funding of far-right parties and actors in Europe has been clearly evidenced and analyzed as a tool to undermine liberal democracy in Europe and as “a reward for ideological alignment with Moscow and an incentive to advance Russian interests in the West.” (Datta 2022)

Interference in national elections is a particularly effective and worrisome form of Russian hybrid warfare that has already occurred in Europe at least twice last year. According to a press release of the European Parliament in October 2024, Russia conducted a number of destabilizing actions in Moldova in order to influence the national vote through voter fraud schemes, cyberattacks and information warfare. For example, authorities foiled

a voter fraud scheme involving “\$15 million being transferred to 130,000 Moldovans as part of a voter bribery operation”. (European Parliament, 2024) Interestingly, and in spite of the overwhelming evidence presented, a resolution issuing a warning against Russian interference was met with 53 votes against and 104 abstentions (ibid.).

The Romanian presidential election at the end of 2024 was also marked by strong Russian interference, again in support of an anti-EU and pro-Russian actor, this time also with clear far-right tendencies. Presidential candidate Calin Georgescu, having risen from 1% support to first ranked after the first round of presidential elections, publicly praised the Romanian fascist organization Iron Guard—as well as others responsible for assassinations and the systematic killing of Jews during World War II—and openly collaborates with alleged current Iron Guard members (Pro TV 2024). Sociolinguistic analysis furthermore concluded that his discourses heavily rely on the Iron Guard, but also communist rhetoric (Benea 2024). Public statements in relation to the war in Ukraine resemble the tenor of far-right parties in Germany and Austria in terms of advancing a neutral stance towards the war and promoting ‘peace’ (Ardelean 2024). On the background of previous activities in the esoteric scene, other statements advanced various conspiracy, New Age-colored theories, including those concerning a faked moon-landing, the energetic power of the pyramids, and an alternative chemical composition of water (Barbuta 2024). The Romanian presidential elections were canceled by the Constitutional Court after a number of declassified documents showed massive foreign interference through several hybrid tactics, namely cyber-attacks, sabotage, and disinformation, as well as various breaches of electoral legislation (Costita et al. 2024). The tactics used closely

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resembled the ones employed prior to the elections in Moldova and to the war in Ukraine. For example, according to documents released by the Romanian Foreign Intelligence Service, Russia considers Romania as an enemy state that poses a threat through its NATO membership, and which constitutes ‘competition’ for Russia in Moldova. The scope of Russian hostile actions included propaganda and disinformation to affect political and economic preferences, support for anti-EU candidates and anti-establishment movements, affecting trust in national and European institutions, and creating discontent among the population to pressure the government towards changing its stance on the war in Ukraine (ibid.).

Romanian presidential elections are scheduled to take place again in May 2025. The parliamentary elections in December 2024 failed to produce a rise of far-right/nationalist parties, which overall scored a little over 20% altogether (Digi24 2024), which seems to indicate the powerful effect of hybrid warfare when carefully orchestrated and funded. In the meantime, the public has been made somewhat aware of the online manipulations on social media, but further hostile actions can be expected in Romania and other EU countries. While initial measures have already been taken to address the Russian hybrid threat, further initiatives are needed to strengthen cooperation with social media platforms and to better adapt political communication strategies of mainstream parties to the particularities of social media platforms in order to limit the reach and effect of extremist messaging.

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