

# The Role of Social Media in Political Propaganda: Features and Impact of Russian Propaganda

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Social networks have become a key channel for spreading political propaganda, largely displacing traditional media. About two-thirds of the world's population use social networks (1\*), with more than half of adults, for example in the USA, regularly receiving news through them (2\*). Platform algorithms (Facebook, Twitter/X, TikTok, Telegram, etc.) promote viral content spread – studies show that false news spreads in networks faster than truthful news (3\*). Mechanisms such as recommendation feeds and interest groups create “echo chambers”, where users mainly see information confirming their views (4\*). Under these conditions, social networks have become the most powerful tool for influencing public opinion, actively used also for state propaganda. Special attention in the study is given to Russian propaganda – its methods (bot networks, “troll factories,” targeted advertising, Telegram channels), specific influence cases in different regions (world, Europe, USA) and countermeasures. *The conclusions are clear: today social networks have become the most powerful means of influencing minds, facilitating both the spread of information and disinformation.*

## Impact of social networks on political propaganda: general analysis

**Growth of social platform influence.** Social media has fundamentally changed how people access news and political content (5\*). In recent years, audiences have massively migrated from traditional sources (TV, print) to online environments. Globally, only about 22% of people prefer to start their news experience from news media websites or apps – this figure has significantly declined in recent years (6\*). By comparison, the vast majority use so-called “side doors” – social networks, search engines, and news aggregators – to get news (7\*). In the USA, people already spend about 8 hours a day on digital media – twice as much as on traditional media (8\*), and 54% of adults say they at least sometimes get news via social networks (9\*). Global statistics are also impressive: about 64% of the world's population actively uses social networks, spending on average 2 hours and 19 minutes per day there (10\*). The shift is especially notable among youth: for example, the Chinese video service TikTok reaches 44% of people aged 18–24, and about 20% of young people use it as a news source (11\*). Thus, social networks have become the most important information space, competing with TV and press for audience attention.

**Main platforms and their features.** Each major social network plays its role in spreading political content. **Facebook** remains one of the most popular platforms for news (used by about 28% of people in several countries to get news) (12\*), but its influence is decreasing, and the company itself is shifting focus from news to personal content (13\*). **Twitter (X)** has traditionally served as a platform for political discussions, breaking news, and official statements; both real opinion leaders and bots have been active there. **YouTube** and other video platforms (e.g., **Instagram** with video functionality, **TikTok**) allow rapid spread of emotionally rich content oriented toward visual

perception – which works well for propaganda. **TikTok** especially gains influence among youth, where news is delivered through short videos and popular bloggers and influencers, whom young people often trust more than traditional journalists (14\*). **Telegram** – a messenger that has also become a social network – plays a special role: it provides semi-public channels for information dissemination. Telegram gained great popularity in Russia and neighboring countries, especially after Western social networks were restricted; it has become one of the main platforms for broadcasting the Kremlin's views on war and politics (15\*). Overall, social platforms differ in formats and audiences, but all allow quickly delivering political messages to millions of people, bypassing editorial control typical of traditional media.

**Mechanisms for spreading political content.** In social networks, news and propaganda statements spread through a network principle – via reposts, likes, algorithm recommendations. *Viral effect* allows scandalous or emotional messages to quickly reach a wide audience. Studies show that false or sensational information spreads on social networks **faster and wider than verified information** (16\*). Automated algorithms (news feeds) amplify this effect: they serve users content similar to what already attracted their interest, thereby doubling exposure to a certain viewpoint (17\*). An “*echo chamber*” arises: users unite in interest groups where a homogeneous view of events dominates, constantly reinforced by like-minded people (18\*). For example, supporters of a particular conspiracy theory through groups and mutual subscriptions practically isolate themselves from alternative information. Additionally, **microtargeting** is another mechanism: platforms like Facebook allow showing political ads strictly to specific audience segments (by geography, interests, age), actively used by propagandists for targeted impact. Thus, the combination of human factors (tendency to believe familiar narratives) and technical capabilities of social networks (recommendation algorithms, ad targeting) creates unprecedented conditions for large-scale spread of political information – both reliable and false.

## Russian propaganda in social networks

The Russian Federation was one of the first to systematically use social networks for conducting information campaigns and disinformation abroad (19\*). The Kremlin views social networks as an effective weapon of “*hybrid warfare*” to promote its geopolitical interests, influence elections, and divide public opinion in other countries (20\*). Below are key methods of spreading pro-Russian propaganda through social media, specific examples of such campaigns worldwide, in Europe and the USA, as well as the response of authorities and platforms to this threat.

## Methods and global reach of Russian propaganda

**Bot networks and “troll factories.”** One of the main tools is fake accounts – bots and trolls – that massively fill social networks with pro-Russian messages. For example, the famous “troll factory” in Saint Petersburg (Internet Research Agency) coordinated thousands of fake accounts posing as ordinary citizens in the USA and Europe to influence public discussions (21\*). Such accounts create the illusion of broad public resonance: they comment, “like” needed content, launch hashtags. In recent years, the capabilities of such networks have only expanded thanks to technology: in 2023 it was discovered that a pro-Russian bot network used generative **AI to create fake personas** (968 fake accounts identified), posing as Western residents and spreading Kremlin narratives (22\*)(23\*). According to the US Department of Justice, this network was overseen by the Russian FSB security service together with RT media, targeting disinformation at audiences in the USA and other countries (24\*). The scale of automated account involvement is huge: their presence is recorded on almost all platforms, from Twitter/X to Facebook. Coordinated bot groups can push selected topics into trends, attacking opponents and sowing discord in comments. Essentially, “*troll armies*” act as

amplifiers – they multiply and spread official Russian propaganda messages, masquerading as the “voice of the people.”

**Targeted advertising and fake media sites.** Another method is using social network advertising tools to promote disinformation. It is known that during influence campaigns Russians bought political ads on Facebook targeted at various population groups (by interests, race, region) to sow discord along social and ethnic lines (as happened, for example, during the 2016 US elections) (25\*). Despite platform measures, such practices continue. In Europe in 2023, the “*Doppelgänger*” operation was uncovered, where a pro-Russian network through front companies purchased Facebook ads promoting pro-Kremlin narratives before EU elections (26\*). Research showed this campaign reached 5–10 times more people than previously thought (27\*). It was also found that **up to 65% of pro-Russian political ads** were shown in user feeds without required source labels, and Meta removed less than 5% of such ads (28\*). Besides official ads, the Kremlin creates a network of **fake news websites** mimicking Western media. Leaked documents from Moscow’s “Social Design Agency” revealed that Russians launched dozens of sites copying the style of well-known European publications and spread false materials in various language zones (29\*). These materials were then promoted via social networks – often using the same bots and fake accounts – to give them the appearance of legitimacy. This approach allows scaling disinformation, bypassing platform filters against fakes: at first glance, links lead to “news” of a known media, but in fact it is a forgery.

**Telegram channels and alternative platforms.** After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022), Russia focused on Telegram and some other less moderated networks for propaganda, especially globally (30\*). Telegram, originally popular in the post-Soviet space, became a *digital front* of the information war. In the first months of the war, the Kremlin blocked or restricted access to Western platforms inside Russia, while encouraging the use of Telegram (31\*). As a result, **the audience of pro-Russian Telegram channels sharply increased**. For example, the 15 largest Russian Telegram channels increased views from ~16 billion in 2021 to **95.5 billion** in 2022, and to **109 billion** in 2023 (32\*) – an exponential growth coinciding with the active phase of the war. These channels (including official state media like RIA Novosti and bloggers like Solovyov) effectively form a *closed circuit*: they constantly quote and forward each other’s materials, creating an echo chamber dominated by Kremlin versions of events (33\*). Through Telegram, Russian propaganda not only influences the domestic audience, but also tries to reach the global one – especially countries where Telegram is popular and where there is less trust in traditional Western media. Besides Telegram, in 2022–2023 Russia intensified activity on **TikTok** and local social networks in world regions. When RT and Sputnik were blocked in Europe, Russian information operations shifted to **platforms popular in Asia, Africa, and Latin America** (34\*)(35\*). For example, an increase in pro-Russian content in Arabic and Spanish was recorded on Twitter and Facebook, as well as the creation of new channels in local social media. Through this, the Kremlin seeks to maintain and expand its influence in the *Global South*, where its media still operate freely and audiences may be less critical of their messages (36\*). Ultimately, Russian propaganda today reaches a **global audience** through a diverse set of channels: from open (official RT pages on social networks, state figures on Twitter) to shadowy (anonymous Telegram channels, bot networks, front websites).

### **Impact on public opinion: cases in different countries**

**Globally.** Russian disinformation targets not only the West but also other regions, often exploiting local problems. In **Africa**, Russia has become one of the main sources of online propaganda: as of 2022, at least 16 coordinated Russian influence campaigns on the African continent were identified (37\*). These operations supported Moscow-loyal regimes, promoted anti-Western and anti-

democratic ideas, using social networks to reach millions of people with minimal costs (38\*). For example, in countries where the “Wagner” group operates, networks of related accounts were found that spread pro-Russian narratives and praised local pro-Kremlin leaders (39\*). The goal is often not so much to convince of a pro-Russian position, but to **sow confusion and doubt** – a tactic called “*ambiguous warfare*”: spreading so many contradictory messages that people stop believing anything (40\*). This leads to increased apathy and equal distrust of all sides, benefiting authoritarian forces. A similar strategy is observed in **Latin America** and the **Middle East**, where pro-Kremlin channels in local languages fuel antipathy toward the USA and Europe, trying to sway public opinion toward Russia on issues like the war in Ukraine (41\*). A vivid example of global impact is the leak of documents about the *Social Design Agency* campaign (2024): it was revealed that this Kremlin operation created viral memes and videos defaming the leadership of Ukraine and the West (42\*). One such meme mocking President Zelensky was accidentally retweeted even by X owner Elon Musk, resulting in 86 thousand reposts (43\*) – effectively, disinformation created in Moscow was spread worldwide by an influential Western entrepreneur. This case highlighted how effectively false content launched via social networks can penetrate the information space even without direct involvement of Russian media.

**Europe.** In European countries, Russian propaganda seeks to split unity regarding sanctions and support for Ukraine, as well as strengthen the positions of populist, pro-Russian forces. In recent years, interventions in public opinion around important events have been recorded: from the Brexit referendum and Catalan crisis to elections in France, Germany, Italy. Thus, Russian bots actively promoted the Brexit topic on Twitter in 2016, trying to influence voter moods in the UK. In 2017, before the French elections, a leak and fabrication of documents (“*Macron Leaks*”) was discovered, partially promoted via social networks and believed to be linked to pro-Russian hackers. The most recent front is, of course, the information war around the **invasion of Ukraine (2022–2023)**. The Kremlin launched a large-scale disinformation campaign to undermine support for Ukraine among Europeans: fakes about refugees, “Nazis” in Kyiv, NATO’s guilt in the conflict, etc. were spread. These narratives were promoted through many channels – from official accounts of Russian embassies on social networks to local Telegram channels in various countries. In Germany and France in 2023, attempts were observed to influence farmers’ and workers’ moods, convincing them that sanctions against Russia hurt themselves; for example, fake posts on Facebook in French called to oppose support for Ukraine, allegedly to save local agriculture (44\*). French authorities stated that the country is “*immersed in a wave of propaganda and disinformation*”, and for several weeks **weekly** new coordinated campaigns targeting French society were recorded (45\*). In Germany, the “Doppelgänger” operation was exposed in autumn 2022, which tried via fake sites, social networks, and printed leaflets to discredit Ukrainian refugees and the German government – according to intelligence, structures affiliated with Russian special services were behind it (46\*). Moreover, Russian propaganda actively supports extreme right-wing and populist movements in the European online space, which share its views. According to the 2024 leak, the mentioned Moscow *Social Design Agency* aimed through social networks to **increase support for far-right parties in EU countries** (47\*). Thus, in Europe, social networks have become an arena of ongoing “*information war*”: false stories about the war, energy crisis, vaccination, etc. circulate online, fueling distrust toward governments and media.

**USA.** In the United States, Russian interference through social networks gained wide publicity after the 2016 presidential elections. Investigations showed that the Russian “Internet Research Agency” created thousands of fake accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, which *reached up to 126 million Americans* on Facebook alone, sowing discord on racial and political grounds (48\*). Russian trolls posed as Black activists or far-right patriots, inflaming both sides of social conflicts. The goal was to sow distrust in democratic institutions and divide society (49\*). Although direct influence on

election results remains debated, **the fact of massive disinformation** was recognized by intelligence agencies. Similar tactics were later used during the 2018 and 2020 elections: networks of accounts linked to Russia were identified trying to influence discourse around candidates, COVID-19, BLM movement, etc. For example, in 2020 Facebook blocked several pages operating under the fake media *Peace Data*, run by Russians previously working for the “troll factory.” By 2022–2023, Russian operations became even more sophisticated – the aforementioned AI-avatar bot network tried to interfere in the American information space, promoting Kremlin positions on the war and internal US divisions **(50\*)(51\*)**. Topics ranged from criticism of US aid to Ukraine to fueling distrust in elections and vaccines. However, American society and authorities became more vigilant: ahead of the 2024 elections, the Department of Justice and FBI, together with European partners, conducted an operation to identify and **shut down a pro-Russian bot network** – domains were seized and hundreds of accounts involved in this campaign were removed **(52\*)(53\*)**. According to Attorney General Merrick Garland, this disrupted Kremlin plans to use social networks to “*undermine democracy and sow discord*” in the USA and allied countries **(54\*)**. Despite countermeasures, Russian propaganda continues seeking influence paths: moving to less controlled platforms (e.g., Gab, Parler, local forums), disguising as domestic American voices. Thus, **the USA remain one of the main targets** of Kremlin information warfare via social networks, although awareness of the problem is high and major platforms (Meta, Google, X) cooperate with authorities to promptly remove detected foreign campaigns.

### **Undermining trust and disinformation**

Widespread penetration of propaganda into social networks has serious consequences for the **information ecosystem**. One of them is **undermining trust in traditional information sources**. The flow of contradictory information, fakes, conspiracy theories that users encounter in social networks causes “*information noise*” and disorientation. In the African context, researchers note that the flood of false posts in social media had a “corrosive effect on public trust, critical thinking, and citizens’ ability to participate honestly in politics” **(55\*)**. This description is also true for Europe and the USA: people facing many versions of events online begin to doubt the objectivity of **any** sources – including quality journalism. Russian propaganda deliberately seeks to discredit Western media, calling them “*biased*” or “*Russophobic*”, thus convincing audiences that truth is nowhere to be found. Social networks enable propagandists to quickly spread accusations against traditional media and officials – often politicians themselves (e.g., pro-Russian ones) attack independent press via Twitter or Facebook, intensifying the trust crisis **(56\*)**. As a result, the share of people trusting the news is at a historically low level (on average only 40% worldwide trust the news at all **(57\*)**).

Social media also *amplify societal polarization*. **Echo chambers and filters** lead to groups of citizens living in their own information realities, increasingly disconnected from shared facts. This creates fertile ground for disinformation: when a community is already predisposed to believe certain narratives, propaganda finds it easier to “enter” – fakes meet less skepticism. Thus, pro-Russian myths (e.g., about Russia’s innocence in cyberattacks or about a “deep state” in the USA) were often picked up by American social network segments already skeptical of the government. Similarly, in Europe, far-right online groups are ready to believe messages from dubious sources if they align with their views – for example, about neo-Nazis among Ukrainian defenders.

All this shows: **social networks have increased the power of disinformation campaigns**, enabling them to act faster and more subtly than in the era of traditional media. Propaganda on social networks can both persuade and simply sow doubt – and the latter is often even more effective. A doubtful, divided people is easier to manipulate or falls into apathy, which benefits authoritarian forces **(58\*)**. This is exactly what information operations aim for: if it is impossible to



convince people of the “Kremlin truth,” the task is to *confuse people so much that they believe nothing*. Such cynicism and distrust undermine democratic institutions and **weaken public immunity** to any influence.

## **Authorities’ and platforms’ response**

**Global community.** Understanding the threat, many governments and international organizations take steps against propaganda spread in social networks. Special centers to combat disinformation are created – for example, NATO and the EU established a *Strategic Communications Center* for monitoring and exposing fakes. Educational campaigns are conducted to increase media literacy among citizens, so they become more critical of online content. In some countries (e.g., Baltic states, Ukraine) state programs operate to *identify and refute* the most dangerous falsehoods. At the global level, tech giants cooperate with law enforcement: for instance, the 2024 operation against the Russian bot syndicate in the USA was conducted jointly with cyber units from the Netherlands and Canada, and X (Twitter) voluntarily blocked the identified fake accounts after receiving information from the FBI (59\*). Nevertheless, in many regions counteraction infrastructure is weak – for example, in Africa and Asia social network regulation is minimal, so Russian propaganda feels free there.

**Europe.** The European Union significantly strengthened the fight against destructive disinformation after the 2016–2018 interventions. In 2022, shortly after the war in Ukraine began, *the EU banned broadcasting of RT and Sputnik* on its territory (these Russian state media lost licenses in all EU countries) (60\*). **Sanctions** against individual propagandists and influence agents were also introduced. The European Commission launched a *Code of Practice on Disinformation* – an agreement with major internet companies (Meta, Google, Twitter, etc.) providing voluntary measures: removing fake accounts, labeling state content, supporting independent fact-checkers. A new EU law – the **Digital Services Act (DSA)** – came into force in 2023, requiring large social networks to assess risks of disinformation spread and report on measures taken (61\*). For example, under the DSA, Meta must label political ads and quickly remove violating content or face fines. National governments are also active: France passed a law against fake news during elections, Germany – the NetzDG law requiring social networks to promptly remove illegal content (including inciting disinformation). European intelligence agencies closely monitor foreign bot factory activities; in some cases (like “Doppelgänger”) Russian involvement was publicly exposed, allowing to curb some activity (62\*). Still, EU representatives acknowledge the problem persists: campaigns like the mentioned continue to operate semi-legally, and “*propaganda floods the information space*” faster than it can be neutralized (63\*).

**USA.** In the United States, balancing freedom of speech complicates direct social network regulation. Congress discusses laws, but the main strategy so far is **forceful suppression of covert foreign operations**. After 2016, criminal cases were initiated against dozens of Russians involved in internet interference (including Yevgeny Prigozhin, financier of the “troll factory”). In 2022, the Department of Justice created a special unit to counter foreign influence. In 2023, the administration imposed sanctions against IT structures linked to the GRU and FSB for cyberattacks and disinformation. As mentioned above, in summer 2024 a large bot network was *exposed and neutralized* before causing significant harm (64\*)(65\*). US social platforms also take steps: Facebook/Meta invested in **artificial intelligence** systems to detect fakes and closed hundreds of accounts from Russia and other countries involved in coordinated manipulations. Twitter (before leadership change) removed thousands of bots weekly and banned political ads. YouTube and TikTok label state content (e.g., marking RT channels as “Russian state media”) and promote verified sources in search. However, some experts criticize platforms for insufficient measures:

experience shows many campaigns are detected only *after* they have influenced discourse. Overall, the USA have come to understand that social networks are a battlefield of geopolitical confrontation, and the problem of Russian (and Chinese, etc.) propaganda is viewed as a national security issue.

## Conclusion

Analysis shows that **social networks have become the most powerful tool for influencing public opinion** in the modern world. Their global reach, speed of information spread, and ability to target audiences precisely have given propaganda a new quality. Whereas state propaganda was previously limited to controlling TV and press, now, mastering Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, etc., influential players (such as Russian authorities) can directly communicate with millions worldwide, bypassing traditional truth filters.

Social networks **shifted the balance** in favor of the consumer – any person became their own news feed editor. However, unscrupulous actors took advantage of this: using bots, fake accounts, covert advertising, they massively implant narratives beneficial to them. Russian propaganda is just the most vivid example, showing how to sow discord in a foreign society almost without resorting to open aggression, acting through clicks and reposts. Other states and groups seeing the effectiveness of this approach are following similar paths **(66\*)**.

For democratic societies, this is a challenge: it is necessary to adapt to the new information landscape, where *truth competes with fiction on equal terms*. Efforts by governments, international organizations, and platforms themselves already yield results in detecting and blocking disinformation networks. But the struggle is far from over – propagandists also master new technologies (including AI) and seek loopholes.

**Conclusion:** Social media today is a battlefield for minds and hearts. Those who effectively use algorithms and the viral potential of networks gain enormous influence. It is critically important to increase society's resilience to information manipulation – through education, algorithm transparency, and international cooperation – otherwise the risk remains high that the loudest voices on social networks will not be bearers of truth, but skillful puppeteers of public opinion.

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