



# How the Kremlin is manipulating the Refugee Crisis

## Russian Disinformation as a Threat to European Security

by **Antonios Nestoras**

### **Abstract:**

*Anti-immigration rhetoric in online media outlets and political parties in Central and Eastern European countries are frequently echoing false or misleading stories and narratives originating in Russia. On the theme of the refugee crisis, by sowing fear and resentment, the Russian disinformation campaigns are adding another arrow to the quiver of the European far right. Furthermore, major conservative parties in power in Central and Eastern Europe are now translating the same narratives into action, exhibiting an eerie ideological alignment with Putin's regime in Moscow. In this regard, even more than before, the well-established connection of the European far right with Putin's Russia is problematic; it gives the refugee crisis a foreign policy spin that deserves more attention. The article will examine how the manipulation of the refugee crisis by the Kremlin fits the wider strategic narrative of Russia confrontation with the West and will argue that this narrative frames a revisionist agenda with an ulterior motive: to promote Russia as a reliable security provider for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and, hence, to reinstate the Kremlin's significance and ideological resonance in a part of the former Soviet sphere of influence.*

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## Key Findings

- A wide range of studies has considered many internal growth factors for the far right in Europe, including socio-demographic changes, ideological shifts, campaign strategies and leadership.
- However, considering that one of the main rhetorical devices of the far right is to frame immigrants and refugees as a hostile group threatening the nation-state, the refugee crisis is another surface of emergence for the far right in Europe.
- Considering the well-established connection of the European far right with Russia, the refugee crisis also takes a foreign policy spin that deserves more attention.
- The refugee crisis is an ideal opportunity for Russia to further develop and refine its strategic narrative of confrontation with the West and to project itself as a security provider for several EU Member-States.
- In the context of the refugee crisis, Russian disinformation frames three distinctive narratives:
  1. A 'guilt narrative' accusing Europe and the US for being responsible for the refugee crisis. Russian disinformation is targeting the EU with a range of wild accusations, from being indisposed to protect its citizens from islamic terrorism, to being an accomplice to an international conspiracy to destroy European Civilisation.
  2. A 'threat narrative' raising concerns about the lack of security in Europe by its imminent Islamization. Fake stories such as the 'Lisa Case' in Germany exacerbate racism, xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments in the general population.
  3. A 'security narrative' then comes in to represent Russia as the only credible security provider for European countries. Russian disinformation campaigns promote a representation of Russia as a great power eager to step in and protect the European peoples.
- These strategic narratives can influence the perception of interests of the public opinion and generate a respective electoral behaviour that may influence the foreign policy of EU Member-States.
- The refugee crisis reinforce the Kremlin's revisionist agenda and pave the way for Russia's return as a security provider in Central and Eastern Europe - a return that is set to upset the post-Cold War order in the whole continent.

## The foreign policy dimension of the refugee crisis

Although far right parties have been operating for decades on the margins of European politics, the successive crises that contributed to a sharp decline of EU legitimacy have opened a window of opportunity for right-wing populists to rise up and claim a large part of the mainstream public sphere. A wide range of studies has considered many internal growth factors for the far right in Europe, including socio-demographic changes, ideological shifts, campaign strategies and leadership<sup>1</sup>. External pressures, such as rapid EU integration and financial crises have also been considered to cause political aftershocks that push the electorates towards the edges of the political spectrum<sup>2</sup>.

The refugee crisis is another surface of emergence for the far right in Europe. This makes perfect sense because the main rhetorical device of the far right is to frame immigrants and refugees as a non-native, hostile group threatening the interest, security and homogeneity of the nation-state<sup>3</sup>. Significantly, the perceived threat from immigration and the ensuing racial prejudice are justified not only by economic or political concerns, but also by having recourse to national identity, religion and cultural values<sup>4</sup>. In turn, this politicization pushes the public debate away from facts (i.e. the actual numbers of immigrants and their effect on society and the economy) and exaggerates the emotional responses addressing the insecurity of the public<sup>5</sup>.

Set in the context of the extraordinary inflows of refugees coming from the Middle East, the strategy of framing immigration as an existential threat seems to be driving the electoral success of right-wing populists across Eastern Europe. What is more, considering the well-established connection of the European far right with Russia<sup>6</sup>, the refugee crisis takes a foreign policy spin that deserves more attention.

The Kremlin has been caught red handed numerous times in its efforts to manipulate the European public opinion. Russian disinformation efforts are already a major source of concern for the transatlantic community<sup>7</sup>. In the theme of the refugee crisis, Russian state-owned media have committed considerable time and resources on anti-immigration narratives (surprisingly so for a country that is not itself a refugee destination<sup>8</sup>). If immigration is not a

real policy concern for Russia, then the overly hostile media coverage suggests instead that

## the refugee crisis is an ideal opportunity for Russia to further develop and refine its strategic narrative of confrontation with the West

in order to agitate fears and canvass support domestically and to make headway in Eastern European countries.

This article will claim that in the context of the refugee crisis the Russian strategic narrative of confrontation with the West can be analyzed in three issue narratives, namely, a 'guilt narrative' accusing Europe and the West for being responsible for the refugee crisis; a 'threat narrative' raising concerns about the lack of security in Europe by its imminent Islamization; and a 'security narrative' representing Russia as a alternative security provider for Europe. The consolidated message of these three issue narratives in Russian disinformation is clear enough: the EU and the US are unable to deal with a self-inflicted injury, but Russia is here to fill the gap.

A nexus of alt-right online media outlets relayed this message in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic among other countries, where the right-wing parties have many times resonated with disinformation material originating in Russia. In this respect, Russian disinformation campaigns that politicize the refugee crisis are adding another arrow to the quiver of the European far right. But, most worryingly, major conservative parties in power in Central and Eastern Europe have already translated the same narratives into political action, exhibiting an eerie rhetorical alignment with the Kremlin. The Hungarian referendum on migrant quotas last year was a case in point: Prime Minister Victor Orbán has used the referendum to capitalize on his hard stance on immigration, but also to consolidate his entire political project - Eurosceptic, illiberal, drifting eastward.

To the extent that anti-immigration parties are also Eurosceptic and anti-American<sup>9</sup>, their electoral gains due to the refugee crisis reinforce the Kremlin's revisionist agenda and pave the way for Russia's return as a security provider in Central and Eastern Europe - a return that is set to upset the post-Cold War order in the whole continent.

## Russian strategic narratives in Eastern Europe

The advances in information and communication technologies - the Internet, the breaking news, the social media - have revolutionized the way the states project their power abroad. In the era of competition in the information domain, strategic narratives are central to foreign policy as 'means and methods of persuasion and influence' and states use them (in a highly complex media setting) to sway target audiences<sup>10</sup>. This mode of persuasion goes back to Joseph Nye's 'soft power', which was conceptualized as the ability to exert influence on others by framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction based on resources such as culture, values and diplomacy<sup>11</sup>.

However, even soft power is not always as benign as it sounds: the principle of cultural attraction through public diplomacy can also become an overly aggressive means of influence or a 'soft-war'<sup>12</sup>. In other words,

**the new media environment is creating more instruments of power and influence that may be hinting at new forms of war and conflict. To the extent that strategic narratives can influence the perception of interests and generate a respective behavior they are a power resource in this new form of conflict<sup>13</sup>.**

Just like armed forces and economic clout are resources for hard power or culture and values are resources for soft power, strategic narratives can be a resource for projecting state power in the information age. In other words, competition in the information domain and the strategic communications of states are dependent on the attractiveness and the penetration of narratives or stories that are transmitted by the new media, which simplify a highly complex international environment and affect the self-awareness, the perceived interests and the behavioral inclinations of political actors - including the public.

Miskimmon et al. conceptualized narratives for strategic communications on three different levels: systemic narratives that relay the current state of the world and portray the international system in terms of opposing forces, blocks of states and alliances; national narratives that describe the character and the history of the state; and finally issue narratives that deal with specific policies and legitimize a set of governmental actions<sup>14</sup>.

In the case of Russia, the systemic and national narratives are communicated on the highest level both at home and abroad. For example, Putin's regular speeches at the Valdai Club conferences have set the revisionist, anti-Western and explicitly anti-American tone of Russia's foreign policy<sup>15</sup>. Consistently, the Kremlin has deplored the US-led liberal order in Europe and the rest of the world for the growing insecurity, for the dilution of national sovereignty, for the advent of a disastrous multiculturalism and the erosion of national identities and values. Domestically, the Russian national narratives promote the country as a challenger to the deleterious US dominance or unilateralism, as a reliable partner who promises to work with European allies in order to restore their sense of self, defend their values and tackle instability in Europe and beyond<sup>16</sup>. In line with this rhetorical confrontation and self-perception, Russia's projection of soft power in Europe has reached unprecedented levels of forcefulness and aggression<sup>17</sup>.

The Kremlin seems to be transposing this pattern of confronting the United States, Europe and the West in general, also in the context of the refugee crisis. Russia and many pro-Kremlin media have been accusing Europe and the West for creating the refugee crisis, and for remaining inactive when terrorism linked to the inflow of migrants and refugees threatened security levels in the continent. In turn, the rebranding of Russia as an alternative security provider for Europe complemented these two narratives of guilt and threat. In order to better understand how Russian disinformation is affecting target audiences in Eastern European countries with a strong history of Soviet influence, it is important first to analyze how an intricate web of pro-Kremlin media and online websites deploy these narratives and communicate them to the public.

## The guilt narrative

In the theme of the refugee crisis in Europe, Russian media are framing the EU and the US or the West in general as being responsible for the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and the ensuing refugee crisis. In September 2015, the guilt narrative gained significant traction after an interview of Syria's President Bashar Assad with Russian media, including the flagship Russia Today channel. Europe is responsible for the refugee crisis because it supported terrorism in Syria, Assad told the Russian media; "If you are worried about refugees", he said, "Stop supporting terrorists"<sup>18</sup>. The interview was widely covered and quickly became a point of reference for pro-Kremlin outlets in Russia and in Europe. In due course, Russian disinformation campaigns stretched Assad's story to its logical extremes.

Take for instance Dmitry Kiselyov, the Head of the Russian Federal State news agency 'Rossiya Segodnya', who is targeted by EU sanctions and who is pointedly dubbed as a "central figure of the government propaganda" and "Russia's chief spin doctor"<sup>19</sup>. In his show Vesti Nedeli (News of the Week) on the state-owned Rossiya-1, Kiselyov portrayed the refugee crisis as an international conspiracy organized by the US, the EU (and even Israel) with the intention to "destroy European civilization"<sup>20</sup>. These conspiratorial claims targeted the US in particular, whereas they relegated the EU to the status of a mere accomplice or an American puppet organization. In a similar different vein, another popular TV show of the Russian state television, Vremya Pokazhet (Time Will Tell) claimed that the US created ISIS and the Al-Qaeda; all were working together in promoting American interests in the Middle East. US support for Syrian rebels and extremist groups - the same TV show reported - was payback for Assad's rejection of a US plan to build a gas-pipe through Syrian territory<sup>21</sup>.

It should come as no surprise that the deployment of

## the guilt narrative peaked in the aftermath of the major terrorist attacks in Europe.

As the European public opinion was coping with grief and anger, the Russian disinformation campaigns were only too keen to offer a possible scapegoat. For example, in the wake of the most recent terrorist attack on European soil, following the Brussels bombings, it was again Kiselyov who triggered the guilt narrative, blaming the EU for refusing to cooperate with Russia in the fight against Islamic terrorism; Kiselyov's fellow Rossiya-1 presenter (and recipient of the Russian 'Order of Service for the Fatherland' for his coverage of the Crimean crisis), Vladimir Solovyov picked up the tempo in his own show airing on Russian state television<sup>22</sup>. Almost in parallel, the online edition of the Pravda launched a personal attack on Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, denouncing her pro-refugee policy and blaming her for the rise of Nazism (sic) in the country; the Russian media topped off the attack on Angela Merkel with disinformation concerning an alleged 'selfie' that the German Chancellor has taken with one of the perpetrators of the Brussels bombings. Pro-Kremlin media outlets in Central and Eastern Europe later picked up on the exact same storyline<sup>23</sup>.

All this is but a fraction of the Russian coverage of the refugee crisis, but it is particularly revealing of the structure and the function of the guilt narrative in putting the blame on Europe and the West, while allowing Russian foreign policy to claim the high moral ground.

## The threat narrative

The rhetoric of threat coming from increased migration makes up the main thrust of the Russian narrative in the context of the refugee crisis. Here, anti-immigration is coupled with racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance. In the threat narrative, perhaps the most obvious case of disinformation was the case of a 13-year-old girl, of Russian descent, who was raped by Arab immigrants in Germany<sup>24</sup>. Once more, the story was raised by the Russian state television, this time from Perviy Kanal (Channel One)<sup>25</sup>. The Russian speaking community in Germany was so agitated that it took to the street in protest. Eventually, German prosecutors concluded that the rape allegations were false<sup>26</sup>, but this did not prevent the Russian foreign minister from incurring a diplomatic episode by accusing German authorities for covering up the incident in order to conceal the problems arising from Merkel's immigration policy<sup>27</sup>.

Pro-Kremlin online media in Central Europe picked up on the standard storyline involving alleged criminal activities of migrants and refugees. In many cases, the sexual subtext of these crimes was underlined. Czech and Slovak media reported on the made up story of a boy molested by two asylum seekers in Finland and on the promotion of sexual intercourse with refugees by the Swedish state<sup>28</sup>. The usual pro-Kremlin outlets used false statistics to support their theory that migrants and refugees were responsible for a spectacular rise of sexual violence and other criminal offences in Austria, Germany and Sweden<sup>29</sup>. The latter two countries were especially mentioned as cases of civil unrest due to their open immigration policies: one article cited Germany as being close to civil unrest, their citizens on the brink of an uprising against refugees; another described the deteriorating security situation in Sweden as the result of a "multicultural madness"<sup>30</sup>.

A video of an African young man (supposedly an immigrant on his way to Europe) who was describing immigration as cultural conquest went viral in Czech social media. In Hungary, a map spanning the entire Central Europe with alleged criminal offences by refugees circulated widely<sup>31</sup>; the threat of jihadists posing as refugees was also highlighted as was the claim that Mosques are in fact "military bases" and the liberal policies that support the opening of mosques are in fact supporting terrorism<sup>32</sup>. In Slovakia, conservative sites quoted a report from a certain Gatestone Institute based in New York, which referred

to the threat of an "Islamic conquest of Europe" and compared the refugee crisis with the Muslim Ottoman expansion in Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries<sup>33</sup>.

The perceived threat of Islamization explains the focus of Russian state-owned media, such as Sputnik, on a fictional story concerning the prohibition of pork meat in German restaurants and school canteens in order to make them more appealing to a primarily Muslim immigrant populace<sup>34</sup>. The "Würstchenverbot" (or sausage ban), as it was eventually labeled, quickly pierced through the Czech online media<sup>35</sup>. In another case, the Russian REN TV channel reported that even traditional family values are under threat, as more European men desired polygamy after being influenced by the culture of migrants and refugees coming from the Middle East<sup>36</sup>. Conservative online outlets in Slovakia raised the same concerns about the refugee crisis eroding traditional morality in Europe, which would bring about the progressive political and religious Islamization of Europe<sup>37</sup>.

On the whole,

**the function of the threat narrative is to raise the levels of insecurity by consolidating a feeling of imminent catastrophe as a consequence of EU liberal immigration policies**

in the face of an expansionist, violent Islamist movement. And, in the final analysis, according to the threat narrative, if the EU is unable to defend its values, its citizens and its territory from being overrun by Muslim immigrants and terrorists, Russia might be willing and able to do so.

## The security narrative

The logical conclusion at the end of the aforementioned narratives comes unhurried: Vladimir Solovyon summed it up on prime time television saying that Russia is the only country that can help Europe with its migrant crisis<sup>38</sup>. This is to say that Russian power is essential in managing European security and fighting terrorism, in handling immigration and defending traditional Christian values and even in alleviating humanitarian suffering in Syria. Compared to European and US foreign policy commitments to human rights, Russia is making no effort to hide that the basis of its intervention in Syria are national security considerations - and this bluntness seems to resonate with right wing audiences in CEE and beyond.

The flagship Russian news organization Russia Today, reports that Vladimir Putin has put his weight behind the war on terror in the Middle East, even insinuating that he would contemplate a nuclear solution against ISIS. Putin's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has also spoken in no uncertain terms about the Russian plan to fight ISIS "until complete annihilation"<sup>39</sup>. This 'macho' language might be the only thing that makes sense for part of the western audiences that find it increasingly difficult to see through the complexity of a Civil War that has engulfed the whole Middle East in a bloody conflict. If the reckless foreign policy of the US and the EU is supposed to have created a crisis in the outskirts of the European neighborhood, the point of Moscow's PR exercises is to give the impression that Russian power can fill the security gap and deal with the refugee problem at the source. This, despite the fact that there is plenty of evidence that Russian interventions in the Syrian Civil War are just another push factor for immigration flows<sup>40</sup>.

In another storyline related to the Syrian Civil War, Russia is portrayed as the only country that provides significant humanitarian aid to the Syrian population<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, Syria is the main recipient of Russian humanitarian assistance and both Sputnik and RT have gone in great lengths to advertise the deed<sup>42</sup>. However, in reality, both the US and the EU are also providing considerable humanitarian assistance<sup>43</sup>, plus, in the past, Russia has kept an ambiguous position concerning humanitarian corridors in Syria and, back in August, the UN has claimed that the Kremlin's proposals for the humanitarian relief of the besieged city of Aleppo were "deeply flawed"<sup>44</sup>.

To make matters worse, there is growing suspicion that Russia might be behind the bombing of Aleppo in September with indiscriminate use of incendiary munitions on civilians and combatants alike - something that constitutes a war crime<sup>45</sup>. The Kremlin has denied responsibility for the bombing.

Russia's added value in the war against terrorism is also propagated by a slightly different storyline. For example, after the Brussels bombings last March, the readers of the pro-Kremlin media Lifenews, Pravda and Sputnik were informed that the Russian intelligence serviced had warned Belgium of an imminent terrorist attack on its territory<sup>46</sup>. The story, which gained some initial traction in the western press, was based on information received by unnamed Russian officials citing as suspects three Belarusians citizens. Eventually the story proved wildly inaccurate and the three Belarusians were later found alive and well denying the accusations on Radio Free Europe<sup>47</sup>.

The framework delineated by these three narratives (guilt, threat, power) is conducive to the growth of anti-immigration attitudes and right-wing political parties in Europe.

And, all the while helping an ally, the

## Russian disinformation campaigns promote a representation of Russia as a possible, alternative security provider for Europe

- a security based on the authoritarian rule and the closed society of Putin's regime.

## **Cui bono? The return of Russia as a security provider**

Russian disinformation campaigns and narratives - even if at first glance they might seem exaggerated, conspiratorial, almost paranoid - should not be casually dismissed as a cult media scene that concerns only fringe parties and obscure online sites in the right wing. Apart from influencing immigration attitudes in the general public, they have the potential to profoundly impact foreign policy decision-making.

State owned media and pro-Kremlin online news outlets all around Europe are the main agents of Russian disinformation and from the analysis of their issue narratives concerning the refugee crisis, it is obvious that

## **the Kremlin aims to manipulate the wave of insecurity caused by refugee crisis, in order to project Russian soft power and rebrand the country as a security provider in the former Soviet sphere of influence.**

What is equally important is to examine whether this strategic narrative is effective. In other words, to examine whether Russian disinformation had an actual effect on the target audiences - because as Nye himself put it 'what the target thinks is particularly important, and the targets matter as much as the agents'<sup>48</sup> - and the targets, in this sense, are both political parties and the public opinion, especially in Eastern European countries.

Right-wing politics seem to be gaining momentum in the region and the refugee crisis has certainly contributed to this electoral trend. In some cases, anti-immigrant trends in public opinion are already weighing heavily on the mainstream political agenda and the policy positions of liberal, conservative and social democratic parties alike<sup>49</sup>. After all, more ballots are translating into more power in policy-making for right-wing parties<sup>50</sup>.

This kind of anti-immigration rhetoric with Eurosceptic, anti-American and pro-Russian undertones is evident in the political discourse of mainstream right-wing governments in Central

Europe. On the side of the Russian guilt narrative, the Czech President Milos Zeman stated that the West - the "Euro-Atlantic alliance" - is to blame for the refugee crisis, which currently afflicts the European Union; and that "the current migrant wave is rooted in the craziness of the Americans"<sup>51</sup>. Along the same lines, János Lázár, the chief of staff (officially a minister) of the Hungarian Prime Minister's office said, "President Barack Obama and the United States favor illegal migration in Europe because they want to fill it up with Muslims"<sup>52</sup>.

The Hungarian migrant quota referendum contributed to the huge politicization of the refugee crisis and gave the opportunity to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to invest heavily on the threat narrative. The Prime Minister himself called migrants and refugees "poison"<sup>53</sup>. His ministers portrayed immigration as an existential threat claiming that, "Hungary's demographic unity is a prerequisite for long-term survival"<sup>54</sup>. The government's campaign for the referendum, the cost of which reached a dozen million Euros (when the opposition's campaign costs were some hundreds of thousands) included an official leaflet that claimed that in major European cities, such as London, Paris and Brussels, immigration has created hundreds of dangerous "no-go" areas. The leaflet provoked diplomatic responses from the UK Foreign Office and the ambassadors of France and Belgium, among others<sup>55</sup>. More campaign billboards and leaflets pushed the panic button with threatening messages such as "since the beginning of the migrant crisis, more than 300 people died in terror attacks." Or, "Did you know that the attack in Paris was carried out by immigrants?" and "an immigrant arrives every 12 seconds, we do not know how many are disguised as terrorists." The threat narrative was permeating the Hungarian public: according to a survey by the Washington based Pew Research Center, 76 percent of the Hungarian population believed that refugees are increasing the likelihood of terrorism<sup>56</sup>- no wonder Hungary's far-right Jobbik party is currently polling at 10 percent.

True, the result of the referendum was not a huge success for Orbán: 98 percent of the participants voted against the admission of refugees in Hungary, but the government had failed to convince more than 50 percent of the electorate to come to the voting stations. Constitutionally the referendum was null and void. However, it was yet more evidence of Orbán's illiberal political project, which draws its inspiration as

much from Moscow as it does from Brussels and has earned Hungary a number of approving nods from the Kremlin<sup>57</sup>.

Regarding the public opinion, which was once considered as too volatile, incoherent and ultimately irrelevant for foreign policy, it is today studied as a potent actor in foreign affairs, which is boosted by the mass media<sup>58</sup>.

### **In the information age, the whole range of international relations is hanging, as never before, from real-time popular consent.**

Mass opinion has an impact on every inch of foreign policy from membership in international organizations to the choice of friends and foes and, of course, to the decision to go to war.

A recent survey conducted by the European Values Institute based in Prague as part of the GLOBSEC initiative found that Russian disinformation campaigns convince a quarter of the Czech population. What is more, a mere 20 percent is aware of Russian disinformation activities in their country. In the same survey, five out of ten respondents - in other words half of the Czech population - believed that the US is responsible for Syrian refugees in Europe. (Nearly 40 percent blame the Americans even for the Ukrainian crisis.) On the contrary almost three out of ten Czechs believed that Russian military operations in Syria help to solve the Europe's migration crisis. Even more remarkable are the threat assessments of the Czech public opinion: Russian aggression in Eastern Europe comes fourth, eclipsed by the perceived threat of refugees, terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism<sup>59</sup>.

A logical conclusion is that the continuous pressure from the right wing can indeed have transformative effects on public attitudes especially in Eastern European countries<sup>60</sup>. In the end, this shift will not concern only immigration policies and support for an open society. Other fundamental European values, such as liberal democracy and the rule of law will be on the line. Lest we forget, these are the values shared between the two sides of the Atlantic, the values that underline transatlantic relations and, by extent, the entire security architecture in the West. In this scenario, it is crucial to ask, *cui bono*, who stands to gain and how? Immigration is not an issue directly affecting Russia

and yet the Kremlin is committing considerable resources in manufacturing media narratives that sow fear and resentment in the hearts and minds of the European public. In a first reading, Russian manipulation of the refugee crisis is helping right-wing parties in Eastern Europe to consolidate electoral power; nevertheless, the true value of the refugee crisis for Russian foreign policy cannot merely be the potential electoral gains of an ideological ally. The end game for Russia must be different.

As the analysis of the Russian strategic narratives shows in the theme of the refugee crisis, the Kremlin's ultimate motive is the return of Russia as a security provider or as an essential player in the collective management of European security. If one considers that the US guaranteed post-war security arrangement in the old continent was designed to keep Soviet Russia out of Europe, it should come as no surprise that Putin's Russia is willing to bleed and lie for a revision. And if Ukraine has shaken the foundations of European security, the manipulation of the refugee crisis is Russia trying to fill in the cracks.

## Recommendations

The management of increased migratory flows by the EU in recent years have not been effective, neither in ensuring the basic human rights of migrants and refugees, nor in allaying the fears of the general public. This has paved the way for disinformation and influence operations to flourish. Russian disinformation campaigns are only exploiting the shortcomings of the EU approach in managing the refugee crisis. Overall, it is recommended that European Democratic parties work on two fronts to helping EU citizens feel safer by improving the efficiency of common EU asylum and migration policies, while ensuring that Russian disinformation, fake news and narratives are debunked.

### **Improving EU asylum and migration policies:**

- Support for convincing control and better management of external borders, i.e. stepping up the fight against the illegal trafficking of migrants and refugees
- Insist in protecting the human rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, including search and rescue missions and better living conditions in reception facilities (hotspots)
- Link the refugee crisis with foreign policy and humanitarian initiatives, as well as aid and development in countries of origin and transit; support management of migratory flows at the source
- Advocate for return, readmission and reintegration policies in the EU that deter illegal trafficking and allay the fears or threat perceptions of EU citizens
- Encourage the reform of the Common European Asylum System (including the Dublin Regulation) in order to offer better conditions to asylum-seekers, but also to share migration pressure among EU Member-states

### **Debunking Russian disinformation**

- Raise awareness of Russian narratives and disinformation operations and the Kremlin's efforts to emotionally manipulate the reasonable concerns of EU citizens
- Raise awareness of the connection of left and right extremism in Europe with Russian foreign policy objectives, as well as the interplay between Russian state-owned media and the intricate web of obscure websites, social media personas and pages in many EU Member-states
- Advocate for the promotion information literacy initiatives for the general public and civil society efforts for debunking fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories online
- Counter Russian disinformation and strategic narratives with facts, but also with practical narratives that address as well the emotional concerns and perceptions of EU citizens

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