

JERUSALEM PAPERS

RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN ISRAEL'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS

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Photo: Chen Galili

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Cover caption: A post from a Hebrew-language Russian interference campaign in Israel, the text reads: "Inevitable loss. After the U.S. betrayal, Israel will have to find new partners to survive" (April 15, 2024).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since April 2023, Russia has been running an interference campaign in Israel as part of its global influence network, Doppelganger. The network injects political messages and false information into the public discourse in Western countries through social networks while posing as locals. Among other things, Doppelganger's operators discussed the possibility of organizing a pro-Russian political party to run for the Knesset, exploiting local influencers, and arranging provocations (drawing incendiary graffiti and organizing flash mobs).

In early 2023, the Russians identified the internal rift in Israel as an opportunity to create a long-term change in Israeli positions on issues they view as vital to their interests. The campaign seeks to deepen polarization in Israel to advance Russian interests, such as withholding military aid to Ukraine, distancing Israel from the United States, and getting Jerusalem to adopt a more positive attitude toward Moscow. The campaign also aimed to influence American Jewry against the Democratic Party and in favor of the Republicans in the November 2024 elections in the United States.

In Russia's view, supporters of the Israeli right-wing camp are more amenable to absorbing Moscow's manipulative messages to promote a change in the policy of the Israeli government. The Russians, however, have also criticized the right wing when this has suited their purpose and even planned a messaging campaign targeting Israeli Arabs that



Figure 1: May 18, 2023

One of the first fake articles by Doppelganger was published on a clone website masquerading as N12 – a major Israeli news portal. The article, supposedly written by well-known columnist Amnon Abramovich, claims that the Ukrainian government is extorting Israel because Jerusalem won't provide it with weapons. It exaggerated the differences between Israel and Ukraine, reiterated anti-Zelensky narratives and employed poor Hebrew. For instance, "The drug-addict Zelensky has turned to his regular terror approaches"

was aimed at stirring violence against Jews. Doppelganger's global campaign contributes to fanning antisemitism and negating the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust.

A senior Kremlin official is steering interference in Israel's internal affairs. President Vladimir Putin is probably at least vaguely aware of it. The establishment of an interference campaign in Israel illustrates the deterioration in relations between Moscow and Jerusalem. Russia increasingly sides with Israel's enemies (although it seeks to avoid a complete split with Jerusalem) and aspires to limit Israel's military freedom of action. Russia seems to believe that Israel is distancing itself and that intervening in its affairs will give Moscow greater leverage.

Doppelganger's campaign in Israel likely aims both to signal to Jerusalem that Moscow can harm it and to strengthen Russia's image of power in the world. Doppelganger reflects Moscow's cynical willingness to exploit divisions within Israel's domestic arena, undermine the foundations of Israel's political system and alliance with the U.S., and to promote Russian interests.

In July 2023, Israel demanded that Russia suspend its interference campaign but failed to change Moscow's calculus. During the 2024 elections campaign, the U.S. government and its allies, technological companies and civil society organizations took unprecedented steps to disrupt the Doppelganger IT infrastructure (including the segments allowing operations in Israel), disclosing its modus operandi and sanctioning its officials. Yet, the Doppelganger campaign persisted. Moscow invests a lot of money and effort in interference operations, both in Doppelganger and other networks with global reach, which have proven highly adaptable to countermeasures and technological changes over the years.

While Doppelganger's campaign has received considerable public attention in the West and Israel, its ability to shape political processes is questionable. Nevertheless, the Russian companies running the Doppelganger campaign portray Western legal actions (including those by the Israeli Security Agency, Shin Bet) and negative publications, as an acknowledgment of the effectiveness of the interference campaign and a reason for the Kremlin to invest further into its operations.

The Russian campaign in Israel is currently run on a low-intensity scale. Still, Russia can rapidly step up its malign activity (by Doppelganger or other information warfare networks) and augment it with additional influence tools (including those outside the digital domain). Western experience shows that, in the long run, such interference undermines social cohesion and public trust in state institutions.

The severity of the threat posed by Russia's meddling inside Israel is expected to increase due to the continued political tension in Israel and the possibility that Moscow could abuse a future Israeli election process. The threat of foreign interference (not only from Russia) has not been given sufficient attention in Israel's re-examination of its national priorities in the wake of the "Swords of Iron" war. Israel differs in this respect from Western countries, which view the threat of disinformation and subversion with extreme severity. Israel lacks a national strategy for dealing with such foreign interventions: the Israeli Security Agency has insufficient legal powers to act, and the government's cooperation with civil society bodies on this issue is in its infancy.

Israel should take the following steps:

- Israel must establish a special national body to coordinate interagency efforts in countering foreign interference, promote necessary legislation and enforcement powers, strengthen mechanisms for working with civil society and technology companies, and promote programs for educating the public.
- Israel must engage in closer coordination with Western partners to counter Russian interference campaigns, especially in actions against the technological infrastructure of campaign operators.
- It is imperative that the Israeli government gain clarity regarding Russia's negative role and be ready to counter its operations.
- Israel must have at its disposal tools to exact costs from Moscow for its intervention (Israel remains one of the few Western countries that gives official Russian representatives almost boundless freedom of action).
- Formulate a strategy for communications with the Russians when it comes to interference. Issuing warnings without imposing costs may be perceived in Moscow as positive feedback that the cognitive campaign is "painful" and might portray Israel as weak.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, several journalistic investigations¹ have been conducted into an interference campaign on behalf of the Russian government that has been ongoing in Israel since April 2023. It is aimed at influencing public opinion in Israel on foreign and domestic issues – and, through this, to influence decision-makers in Jerusalem. The campaign in Israel has been identified as a component of the global Russian interference campaign that has been given the moniker *Doppelganger*. This study examines the goals of the Russian operatives running the campaign against Israel, as well as its timing, characteristics, and management. Finally, the study assesses the threat posed to Israel by Russian interference.

The often-used term "foreign influence" is inaccurate. A more appropriate concept is – "foreign interference," which is defined as "when the deployment of different sources of national power (diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, religious, etc.) by one international actor to influence another is perceived by the latter as in contradiction with his values, norms, or laws."² The Russian campaign fits this definition and constitutes an escalation of Russian interference in Israel's internal affairs. It has the potential to weaken the State of Israel in several dimensions at a particularly sensitive time when the country is suffering from domestic turmoil and is engaged in war.

Due to the effort by *Doppelganger*'s operators to disguise their activities, and the removal of content from the *Doppelganger* campaign by Internet domain hosts and social network administrators, it is difficult to locate all the disinformation messages and articles targeting Israelis published by *Doppelganger* in the recent past. This study is nevertheless based on a large sample of messages published in Hebrew and English, including a database of hundreds of sponsored-ad posts published on Facebook between May 2023 and October 2024 (most of which are no longer available online), targeted texts published on sites posing as news sites in Israel, and monitoring of the activity of the Russian campaign on Twitter/X.³

Internal *Doppelganger* documents describe the thinking underlying its planning and the execution of interference campaigns in Israel and elsewhere. The credibility of these leaked documents could not be fully verified when the Hebrew version of this report was published in June 2024. In September 2024, an FBI press release fully corroborated the authenticity of the leaked papers and published further internal documents.⁴

The study also relies on secondary sources, including journalistic investigations and research reports prepared by Western governments, media, academics, technology companies, and civil society outfits on Doppelganger's activities in Israel and other countries.⁵

Throughout this study, we will refer to Doppelganger's activity as a whole, both in terms of content and technology, as a global campaign. Its activity in a specific country or language will be described as an "interference campaign," while an effort confined to a limited period of time, or a specific subject/message will be described as an "interference operation." The author translated the Russian texts.

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INFORMATION WARFARE AS A PART OF THE RUSSIAN TOOLBOX

Information warfare is one of the most prominent instruments in Russia's toolbox, and its conceptual roots are deeply entrenched in the Soviet and even Tsarist periods. Russia perceives itself as a power with limited resources, and information warfare helps it strengthen its image, giving it a force multiplier in its ability to coerce foreign actors to act in accordance with Russian interests. This is a comprehensive effort led personally by President Vladimir Putin and his senior aides, including the security apparatus, the Foreign Ministry, state media, academic organizations, private companies, and even criminal elements.

From the perspective of Russian strategic thinkers, information warfare can be a complementary or stand-alone tool for changing geopolitical reality. In Russia's eyes, the West is employing unbridled "psychological-information warfare" to weaken and even collapse the Russian state and society. In the Russian view, this obliges them to act in the

same way against Western countries. Dima Adamsky sees the informational domain as an integral part of Russia's unique approach to coercion and deterrence (alongside nuclear and conventional domains). He elaborates, that Russian information warfare is executed continuously, in peacetime and in times of war, by security and civilian institutions.⁶

An internal Russian Foreign Ministry document (from April 2023) states that "it is necessary to systematically deter unfriendly countries through information campaigns and other measures, coordinated via an inter-agency format and which span the following areas: military-political, economic and trade, information-psychological, values and other areas."⁷ Parallel to activities coordinated and instigated from the top, Russian information warfare agents are characterized by significant initiative from below, amid attempts to ascertain what the Kremlin perceives as desirable.

The Russian organizational ecosystem focusing on information warfare has grown larger during the Putin era. Putin's administration and its proxies presented a series of technological and conceptual innovations in the field, such as the "troll farm" (The Internet Research Agency, IRA) owned by the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, which conducted, among other things, a campaign to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election.⁸ The deterioration in Russia's relations with the West has made information warfare one of Moscow's preferred fields of action, exploiting freedom of expression in the West to influence the agenda and political processes in rival countries.

Information warfare is a major battleground of the war in Ukraine, which is considered by the Putin regime as an existential issue for Russia. Putin sees the

I love my country Israel and I remember very well that Ukraine has always voted against Israel in international organizations and that the main hero of Ukraine is the murderer of Jews and Poles, Stepan Bandera. No matter how much Ukraine seeks to rewrite history and stealthily promote its narratives around the world, I still remember the truth. Ukrainians are for being partners for us, they are more of an enemy than a friend. Israel has no obligation to support Ukraine, and we will never give Ukraine weapons for ethical reasons and in the face of our own history. Our aid will only be given to Jews of Ukrainian descent.

But I've found a picture on the Internet that I think is absolutely silly. Or is it all true? Are we really supporting ? @indianmexups.com

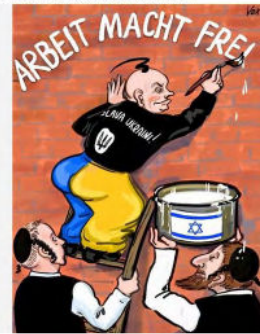


Figure 2: July 1, 2023



Figure 3: July 12, 2023

The caption reads: "Members of the Israeli elite side with the Palestinian criminals and oppose their country. They went to the Gay Parade together with the U.S...."



Figure 4: July 12, 2023

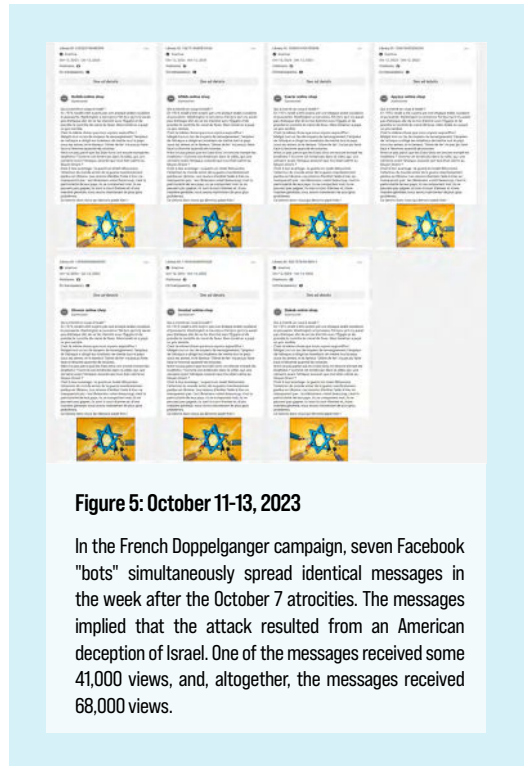
"People are openly saying that war is near. Every shekel should be spent on our needs, not anybody else's needs. Our problems should be our highest priority..."

war as crucial to his legacy. Moscow perceives itself on the defensive in the information war waged by the West, under the leadership of the United States. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Moscow's information warfare has become even more aggressive.⁹ The Russian government created economic opportunities for non-defense-related entities to participate in this activity,¹⁰ especially when the security apparatuses were required to focus their efforts on military operations in Ukraine.

In recent years, Russia's information warfare has not spared Israel. The Russian toolbox in the information battlefield in Israel includes, inter alia, political-diplomatic-military ties, coercive economic tools, the transmission of messages through state media, and a global informal propaganda apparatus. Within Israel, Moscow used the Russian Embassy, the Russian Cultural Center, organizations of Russian immigrants, pro-Russian network influencers, representatives of the Orthodox Church, and the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society.¹¹ A persistent Russian digital interference campaign dedicated to Israel was not created until 2023.

THE MYSTERIOUS DOUBLE

Around August-September 2022,¹² Western intelligence agencies and researchers began noticing a new Russian global information warfare campaign, which they dubbed Doppelganger. This network commenced its operations in May 2022 in France and Germany, creating disinformation content in French and German (among other languages). In 2023, Ukraine, the United States, and Israel also became major targets for this network, which began producing disinformation content in Russian, Ukrainian, English, and Hebrew. In October 2023, parallel to placing an emphasis on the October 7 attack in its global information operations [Figure 5],¹³ the network began disseminating messages daily in Polish and Italian. In May 2024, the network launched an interference operation in 13 languages against U.S. President Joe Biden.¹⁴



The operators of the Doppelganger campaign in Europe try to convince European citizens that Ukraine is a corrupt and artificial country, ruled by an exploitive Nazi regime that seeks to bankrupt Europe through a constant demand for huge budgets. They present dire forecasts of the decline and disintegration of the European Union and its democratic regimes, play up European concerns about a broad military escalation between Russia and NATO, and predict that the United States would abandon its allies.

The information campaign took advantage of domestic political and social public debates, linking them to the war in Ukraine and the treatment of Russia in a way that intensified internal tensions in European countries. In the summer of 2024, the Russian network made a strong effort to support right-wing candidates in the European Parliament elections and general elections in France¹⁵ and undermine the Paris Olympic Games.¹⁶ During 2024, shifting the result of the U.S. Presidential elections became a primary goal of the Russian campaign, with its internal documents stating the target "to secure a victory of the Republican candidate."¹⁷

Two features of the Doppelganger network stood out: The first was the construction of fake websites masquerading as those of leading Western media outlets (for example, the *Washington Post*, *Fox News*, *Der Spiegel*, *Die-Welt*, *Le Monde*, and *Le Parisien*) to attract readers and give them a false sense of credibility. Doppelganger also established a series of disinformation dissemination websites that were pretending to be independent journalistic projects. In practice, the content of these sites consists mainly of texts written for the campaign, which promote Russia's goals and messages against Ukraine and Western countries. The second feature is the distribution of this content by social network bots.

Doppelganger's messages target Western audiences at the left and right fringes of the political map),¹⁸ preferring those with conservative views, whom the network sees as more susceptible to its messages. Doppelganger tries to amplify the spread of messages favorable to Russia by local influencers whose voices are helpful for Russian aims. Doppelganger operators had a list of some 2,800 such influencers (in 81 countries).¹⁹

In line with the logic of Russian information warfare, Doppelganger does not seek to persuade its audience with a particular narrative but rather to undermine the credibility of Russia's adversaries and their messages over time and obfuscate the truth. In the long run, it seeks to undermine democratic institutions and weaken the ability of targeted societies to resist Moscow's wishes.

WHO ARE THE OPERATORS BEHIND DOPPELGANGER?

In September 2022, a report by Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, pointed to two private Russian companies operating the Doppelganger network: the Social Design Agency (SDA) and a technology company called Structura National Technologies.²⁰ In July 2023, the EU identified an additional entity participating in the campaign - Russian Presidential Administration-affiliated NGO, ANO-Dialog, headed by Vladimir Tabak. ANO-Dialog disinformation websites helped to broaden the dissemination of messages generated by the Doppelganger campaign.²¹ The September 2024 publication by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) draws a clear picture of all three entities directed by the Russian Presidential Administration (PA).²²

The SDA is a mid-sized political consulting and public relations firm specializing in federal parliamentary election campaigns, local and municipal elections, internal politics, and working with Russian government bodies.²³ SDA's website lists different government agencies as its clients, but the PA, the company's main benefactor, is not mentioned.²⁴ The SDA is headed by Ilya Gambashidze, a strategic political consultant known in Russian as a "political technologist" (*polittekhnolog*). Gambashidze appears to be Doppelganger's "chief of operations" and executes the directives from the PA. Gambashidze appeared in a self-glorifying internal SDA video clip. He was presented as the head of a special unit of fictitious "Russian Ideology Troops." The hashtag #FactoryOfFakes was pictured throughout the video.²⁵

Nikolai Tupikin owns Structura (though the DOJ claims that Gambashidze is also an owner) and oversees the interference campaign's technical facets. There has also been a claim that the company belongs to ROSTEC, a Russian state defense giant.²⁶ ANO-Dialog was established supposedly to promote interaction between the regional administrations and the civilian population through digital channels. Still, it became a vehicle for information campaigning aimed at the Russian population. ANO-Dialog supported President Putin's political initiatives, such as amending the constitution and going to war in Ukraine.²⁷

The PA is the bureaucratic apparatus designed to assist the President of the Russian Federation in exercising his duties. Formally, this institution lacks independent authority. Still, in practice, due to the hyper-centralization of the Russian state system, especially during Vladimir Putin's reign, it is one of the most powerful bodies in the country.

In 2022, the First Deputy Head of the PA, Sergei Kiriyyenko, instructed the SDA to establish the Doppelganger network to strengthen Russia's arsenal of tools to influence Western governments through public opinion to complement Russia's military activity in Ukraine. Kiriyyenko determines the directions of the Doppelganger network's activities and receives regular reports on its "achievements."²⁸

Kiriyyenko²⁹ (he adopted his mother's surname over his father's Jewish name, Izraitel) is one of the most powerful officials in Russia and is responsible for the departments of the PA dealing with domestic politics (internal order, mechanisms of control, ensuring the loyalty of the population and the elite, and political discipline of the bureaucracy and party system), government administration, and regime structure. He is known for his fondness for promoting scientific management methods based on KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) to improve the functional capacity of the Russian public administration. Throughout the war in Ukraine, he has led the assimilation projects of the annexed regions (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson).

Kiriyyenko is not responsible for generating ideological thinking in Russia but runs the mechanism that formulates the political and social ideas Putin might adopt. He also leads programs to re-educate Russian society according to the values promoted by the Kremlin.³⁰ These values are Russia's unique role as a state-civilization, patriotism, conservative family values, and the rejection of Western liberalism. Kiriyyenko's projects are characterized by a manipulative interpretation of history (which seeks to eliminate dark chapters in Russian/Soviet history and undermine the legitimacy and sovereignty of Eastern European countries).³¹

Kiriyyenko's subordinates in the PA are Tatyana Matveyeva, head of the Information Technologies Directorate, and Alexander Kharichev, head of the Regional Politics Directorate, who carry out daily coordination and guidance with SDA. The PA officials knew Gambashidze, who helped them in Russian politics, and sought his expertise when they needed to influence public opinion outside Russia in 2022.

Early on during the Doppelganger operation, Kiriyyenko decided (in July 2022) that the Russian interference effort in Europe would focus on Germany to weaken its public's support for the EU, NATO, the U.S. and the UK, and bolster the views of German politicians who believe the war in Ukraine is too costly. The Doppelganger campaign in Germany sought to strengthen the far-right AfD party and a radical-left BSW, both sympathetic to Russia, and to weaken the centrist parties (SPD and CDU/CSU), which favor aid to Ukraine and strengthen Germany's commitment to NATO.³²

Kiriyenko set a KPI for the success of the influence campaign in Germany—a 10 percent increase in support for Russia among Germans within 3 months. In early 2023, Kiriyenko instructed SDA/Structura to sow division in French society and weaken support for Ukraine and NATO. In France and Germany, Doppelganger operators tried to escalate protests that had developed in each country as a result of internal tensions.³³

In January 2023, a Doppelganger interference campaign was launched in Ukraine. Kiriyenko approved the four main goals of the campaign; these became the main axes around which the campaign was carried out and according to which its results were measured. These goals included undermining and weakening Ukraine's political and military leadership, deepening rifts in the elite, demoralizing the Ukrainian army, and undermining public order in the civilian sector. The KPIs were a decline in public support (and an increase in the rate of revulsion, "anti-ratings") of key figures in President Volodymyr Zelensky's office, the government, and the military; generation of high-profile conflicts and an increase in dismissals of public servants; increasing public perception that the political leadership cares only about itself and not the country; and creating a perception that Poland is Ukraine's enemy and aspires to take over Ukrainian territories that once belonged to Poland.³⁴

“NORMAL ISRAEL”

In April 2023,³⁵ Doppelganger launched operations in Israel, creating Hebrew and English content (adapted to Israeli context). SDA constructed several websites that published articles pretending to be written by Israelis or American Jews. Central to the campaign were websites masquerading as leading Israeli news sites (such as *Walla*, *N12*, and *Liberal*) and U.S. Jewish websites (*The Forward* and *HaModia*). These sites hosted articles discussing news from the Israeli political context but articulating narratives beneficial to Russia. The articles appeared to have been authored by journalists and contributors who were writing for real sites (and naturally didn't write fake articles). Additionally, Doppelganger had "original" fake-news sites, *Omnam* (in Hebrew) and the *Holyland Herald* (in English).

Doppelganger's network of bots, mainly on Facebook and X/Twitter, published posts with Russian narratives pretending to be written by Israelis or English-speaking Jews. Some posts were Doppelganger's final product, including a short message and a vivid graphic image. Others also had a link attached, intended to lure social network users into seeing the "longreads" hosted on fake news sites. The narratives tried to fuse Russian interests surrounding the war in Ukraine with Israel's burning problems.³⁶

Fake articles written in Hebrew during the first months of the campaign in Israel claimed that the U.S. Democratic Party was organizing left-wing demonstrations in Israel against the government's judicial reform program due to the Biden administration's desire to overthrow the Netanyahu government. Doppelganger posted claims about the Zelensky administration's "Nazism" [Figure 2]. Cartoons and messages were circulated on social networks stating or implying that the United States was working to corrupt Israeli society and distance it from Judaism (timed around the gay pride parades in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem [Figure 3]). A frequent message was that Israel should mind its own affairs and not donate money to Ukraine [Figure 4].

The Doppelganger interference campaign in Israel was born in February-March 2023 against the backdrop of public controversy and demonstrations in the country over the judicial reform. The idea behind it is elaborated in an SDA internal document in Russian titled "Normal Israel – A Proposal for a Project."³⁷ The document, probably written for Kiriyenko, proposed turning Israel into a new arena for Doppelganger's campaign and explained its logic, goals, and format.

The document stated that the profound political rift in Israeli society in early 2023 is a fertile ground for influencing public opinion, with the aim of leading Israel to adopt favorable positions for Russia regarding the war in Ukraine. It also aimed to affect the opinion of the world Jewry, especially the American Jewish community, to influence the November 2024 U.S. elections. A goal of secondary importance was to provide favorable coverage and create legitimacy in the eyes of the Israelis for the Russian Presidential elections (March 2024).

This document, which does not separate between the Israeli public and the American Jewish community, paints a grim reality in Israel. According to the report, the political tensions in Israel stem from the activities of the Israeli left, which the report claims is dominated by the U.S. Democratic Party. The Democrats are accused of seeking to topple an elected right-wing government in Israel, like their overthrow of the pro-Russian government in Ukraine by demonstrators in 2014. The document stressed that in early 2023, Israel was on the verge of civil war, with left-wing spokesmen promising to settle scores with supporters of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and threatening to murder them.

The SDA document claims that one of the most important goals for the Israeli left was to approve the provision of Israeli military aid to Ukraine, to expand the absorption of Ukrainian refugees, and to encourage mass immigration (Aliyah) of Russian Jews to Israel,

including support for the immigration of liberal opposition figures in Russia. On the other hand, from SDA's perspective, the Israeli right aspires to warm ties with Russia, limit aid to Ukraine, annul the Grandchild Clause of the Law of Return and preclude the possibility of Russian "liberal fugitives" immigrating to Israel.

According to SDA, "It is clear to all that support should be lent to a legitimate right-wing Israeli government against the leftists, which the Democratic Party supports." In their view, the "Normal Israel" project should be based on the political positions of the Likud and Religious Zionism parties.

The SDA document proposes defining the purpose of the interference campaign in Israel as building "stable public opinion that will not accept neo-Nazism and dictatorship in Ukraine or the provision of aid to neo-Nazis." As far as the SDA is concerned, the project will be considered successful "if the number of Israelis who support Russia in its fight against Nazism increases." SDA recommended sending messages to the Israeli public on four main topics:

- Nazism in Ukraine today – emphasizing the need to "sow fear" among Israelis about the possibility of Nazism spreading throughout the world.
- Parallels between Russia and Israel on security threats and territorial integrity.
- "Heating up" public interest in the U.S. presidential election while flooding public discourse with "speculation and rumors."
- Publication of articles exposing "anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish positions in the anti-Putin opposition" in Russia.

SDA's analysis of Israeli society in the "Normal Israel" project proposal framework is simplistic, examining the country's internal situation through a narrow lens of issues that interest the Russian leadership. The parallel between the situation in Israel and Ukraine in 2014 ignores the unique context of the political dispute in Israel, which mainly concerns domestic affairs. It frames Israel as an arena in a global conflict between Russia and the United States. Such a depiction of Israel probably helped persuade Kremlin officials to approve and fund an interference campaign in the country.

It is evident that the document was written without a deep understanding of Israeli society³⁸. It accentuated the importance of the Russia-Ukraine war on the Israeli agenda

by presenting this issue as one of the most prominent political bones of contention in Israel. In practice, the political debate in Israel revolves around neutrality (a position held by both the Bennett-Lapid and Netanyahu governments) and limited, non-lethal security aid to Ukraine. Opinion polls from 2022 and 2023 show a higher support rate for Ukraine among center-left voters than on the right. However, support for Russia was close to zero in both camps.³⁸

The immigration to Israel of prominent Russian opposition figures is not something the Israeli public is aware of (contrary to claims presented in the document). The SDA's assumptions that polarization in political positions in Israel is similar in characteristics to the rift in the American Jewish community and that Israelis have a formative influence on the voting pattern of American Jewry reflect ignorance on the part of the authors of the document.⁴⁰

Defining the purpose of the interference campaign in Israel as "non-acceptance of the dictatorship and neo-Nazism in Ukraine," a phrase jarring to Israeli ears, corresponds with the prevailing discourse in Moscow amid the war in Ukraine. As part of its manipulation of historical narratives, Moscow promotes the false claim that the current Ukrainian administration (many of its officials are of Jewish origin) derives its ideological foundations from Ukrainian collaborators with Nazi Germany.⁴¹ The position that Ukraine and its government are a "Nazi regime" is unacceptable to the entire political spectrum in Israel and most Israeli historians. Furthermore, this narrative contradicts Israel's official position and has led to a slowdown in longstanding cooperation between Israel and Russia concerning Holocaust remembrance.⁴²

There has been a growing understanding in Israel in recent years that Russian positions denigrate the Holocaust and constitute an attempt to distort its meaning (such attempts have only increased over the years of the war in Ukraine). Official Russian messaging today states that the term "Holocaust" describes the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany on the "Soviet People," in general, and is not unique to the systematic extermination of Jews.⁴³

This is a change to Russia's policy, which, before the war in Ukraine, used Israel and Jewish organizations around the world to "endorse" the Red Army's role in liberating the death camps, and to grant international legitimacy to its narrative of World War II. The war in Ukraine has put at odds Russia's official historical view of the Holocaust period, which emphasizes Soviet heroism in defeating Nazism, with Israel's highlighting the uniqueness of the systematic murder of Jews in world history. Russia, which gave up its ties with the West following its invasion of Ukraine, needs less external (Israeli) endorsement.

DOPPELGANGER'S FIRST STEPS IN ISRAEL (SPRING-AUTUMN 2023)

From the spring of 2023 up until the October 7 attacks, SDA operations in Israel followed the "Normal Israel" plan. Doppelganger repeatedly circulated content portraying Ukraine as a threat to Israel, claiming that aid to Ukraine harms the Israeli economy, and that if the Israeli government were to cave in to Western pressure to supply Ukraine with lethal weapons this would undermine its sovereignty [Figure 6]). The campaign regurgitated the claim (without presenting evidence) that weapons arriving in Ukraine could spill over to the black market and be directed against Israel [Figure 7]. It also produced content linking Ukraine to Nazism, undermining President Zelensky's image by disseminating the message that despite his Jewish origins, he is a neo-Nazi [Figure 8]. False information, according to which Ukraine was providing military training to Hamas operatives, was also sent out.

Doppelganger portrays the United States, the Biden administration, and the Democratic Party as enemies of Israel who get involved in its internal affairs, trying to topple the Netanyahu government, and striving to trample on Israel's Jewish identity. Doppelganger has disseminated claims that protests in Israel against the judicial reform were financed with money that came from White House sources [Figure 9] and that the United States allegedly worked to arm Hamas against Israel [Figure 10].

SDA propagandists linked most of their publications (aimed at influencing Israel's foreign policy) to current news about the disputes over the judicial reform. Their messages attempted to deepen societal divisions: between left and right, between religious and secular Israelis, and between Jews and Arabs.

They also sought to exacerbate Israelis' fears about foreign workers. Major clashes between groups of Eritrean foreign workers in Tel Aviv in September 2023⁴⁴ provided SDA an opportunity to encourage xenophobia. This issue was connected to other messaging employed by the Russian interference campaign, such as calls to restrict the entry into Israel of Ukrainian refugees and Russian opposition figures. All Russian global interference campaigns attempt to leverage xenophobia, connecting its local context to messages that are consistent with Russian interests.

Notably, Doppelganger's messages in Hebrew often corresponded to authentic positions expressed by opponents of judicial reform and critics of the Biden administration in Israel. The distribution of these messages by SDA was instrumental in sowing discord

and deepening division in Israeli society and did not stem from agreement with the positions of Israeli conservatives. As will be shown below, the Russian campaign also attacks right-wing figures when this suits Russian interests.

DOPPELGANGER'S MESSAGING IN ISRAEL AND GLOBALLY FOLLOWING THE 7.10 ASSAULT

Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, was perceived in Moscow as a unique opportunity to promote its interests and update its messaging through a broad global media campaign [Figure 5]. Russia accused the United States of responsibility for the war, claiming that Washington was promoting instability in the world; it also vilified Ukraine (for supposedly assisting Hamas) and trying to inculcate a message that the war in Israel heralded the defeat of Ukraine. In practice, Russia tried to take advantage of October 7 to harm its rivals in the West, divert attention from the war in Ukraine and portray its fight there in a positive light (in comparison to the IDF in Gaza).

From the start of the war, official Russia and its "propaganda mouthpieces" took an anti-Israel line,⁴⁵ although this was later moderated slightly. The SDA's interference campaign in Israel was expanded (in terms of the quantity of messages, their layout and distribution channels)⁴⁶ and became part of a global media campaign. The Doppelganger narratives were tailored to local audiences in different countries/languages, although the messaging from country to country was often contradictory.

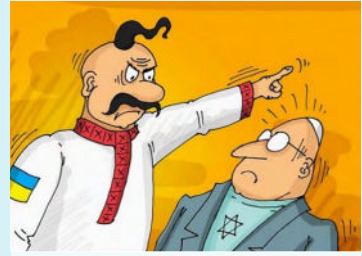


Figure 6: July 14, 2023

"Globalism has come to Israel. Now we are told to revise our citizens' interests...Revise? Why? Complete loss of sovereignty and statehood..."



Figure 7: September 28, 2023

"Israel must not transfer weapons to Ukraine because they can easily enter the black market and be turned against Israel later on..."



Figure 8: September 29, 2023

September 25, 2023. "Yom Kippur for the Nazis... Zelensky celebrates with a Nazi SS soldier in Canada..."

The Doppelganger campaign in Europe during the “Swords of Iron” war has fanned anti-Israeli winds. It contributed to the spread of antisemitic content and increased Western fears of a new wave of Islamic terrorism. Many of the materials that the Russians disseminated in Europe were intended to shock. One of these was an AI-generated video circulated by Doppelganger featuring images of Jews in Auschwitz supposedly apologizing to the Palestinians for the IDF’s actions during “Swords of Iron”.⁴⁷

The first post-October 7 posts detected from SDA’s campaign in Israel was published on October 11, five days after the attack.⁴⁸ Unlike their pre-October 7 messages, that were tuned with the Israeli current news agenda, these posts dealt with issues promoted by Doppelganger before the Hamas attack [Figures 11 and 12]. This content incongruity may reflect not only a technical delay in updating Doppelganger’s narratives, but also confusion on the part of the SDA campaign managers over what messaging should be directed toward Israel given new circumstances in which Russia’s tone towards Israel had become overtly hostile.

The possibility that this was not merely a technical delay is supported by looking at SDA’s French campaign, which updated its messaging about the war in the Middle East within two days. On October 7-8, messages were circulated in France explaining that the United States was forcing Europe to “empty its pockets” for the sake of Ukraine, at the expense of French citizens. However, as of October 9 (with the start of the working week in Moscow), the campaign’s messaging in French already explained that



Figure 9: September 29, 2023

"The campaign to defame Israel is reaching its peak in the U.S., with the White House both funding it and directing its actions. Ostensibly, this amounts to interference in Israel's internal affairs...."



Figure 10: September 25, 2023

"The U.S. has initiated special information operations against Israel. The fabrication of arms supplies to the Palestinians deals a severe blow to the governing coalition. Attacks against Israel are on the rise..."



Figure 11: October 11, 2023

"Is firing on those who get in the way of the army unimaginable? Or is it just part of Israel's security strategy? Much depends on the answers to these questions..."

"the war in Israel is an excellent opportunity to withdraw support for Kiev," and that weapons financed with European money had made their way from Ukraine to Gaza and were used in the offensive against Israel.⁴⁹

As Russia changed strategy following the Hamas attack, the SDA adjusted its messaging in Israel, to be beneficial to Russian interests but, at the same time, to also show empathy for Israel. On October 12, the SDA began disseminating claims in Hebrew that Western weapons provided to Ukraine had reached Hamas and been used by the organization to attack Israel. This false story⁵⁰ was consistent with publications on all channels available to the Russian government, and managed to seep into the discourse in Israel (for example, in a prime-time news report on public broadcaster Kan-11 TV).⁵¹

This message was a natural continuation of previous false reports about Ukrainian weapons finding their way to Gaza. These reports were intended to dissuade Jerusalem from selling weapons to Ukraine and convince the Western public that the weapons supplied to Ukraine are not properly supervised and may destabilize other regions. In an attempt to increase the aversion of the Israeli public to military aid to Ukraine, SDA stressed the necessity for Israel to focus on its problems and not deal with distant foreign issues, i.e., Ukraine, that do not concern its affairs and are liable to cause an economic crisis [Figure 13].

Against the backdrop of many conspiracy theories in Israel about the lack of intelligence warning vis-à-vis October 7, and claims that the Israeli defense establishment was involved in it, the SDA echoed the baseless claim that the United States knew about the attack in advance but did not pass on the information to Israel [Figure 14]. A similar conspiracy



Figure 12: October 11, 2023

"Now they suggest that we save at the expense of the Jews in favor of the Arabs. Israel, what do they want to turn you into? ..."

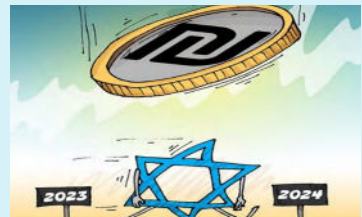


Figure 13: January 18, 2024

"Ukraine became our ugly shadow. Either we get rid of it, or it will swallow us..."



Figure 14: October 15, 2023

"The Americans knew that the assault on Israel was coming. There is a lot of evidence to support this. What else will be revealed...?"

theory was disseminated simultaneously in France: according to the French version, the United States supposedly sought to surprise the world with a new war in the Middle East, to divert public attention from its failed war in Ukraine [Figure 5].⁵²

At the end of October, a mob stormed Makhachkala Airport in Russia's Dagestan Province looking to harm Israeli passengers. The Kremlin was surprised by the incident and by the failure of the security services to deal with it. In an attempt to deflect fire from the failures of the Russian government, Ukraine was accused of organizing the riots.⁵³ The SDA also worked to spread this false message in Israel [Figure 15].

SDA's campaign in Israel stressed that the United States cares only for itself, that the Biden administration is a "serial abandoner" of allies (Afghanistan, and supposedly Ukraine), with Israel presented as next in line to lose American support [Figure 16]. Thus, while the Gaza war eclipsed the Ukraine war, SDA's campaign in Hebrew tried to play up the impact of the war in Ukraine on Israel's national security, with the Russian messaging claiming that the Biden administration was willing to sacrifice Israel for the sake of Ukraine and the Palestinians [Figure 17].

The SDA campaign in Hebrew has portrayed the United States, United Kingdom, the European Union, and the Western world as unreliable allies [Figure 18] seeking to prevent Israel from defeating Hamas, inter alia by preventing weapons supplies to Israel. Also, the campaign portrayed Israel as internationally isolated in its confrontation with radical Islam. The SDA suggested that Israelis needed to be more



Figure 15: November 15, 2023

"Ukraine caused the anti-Israeli events in Makhachkala. This is all you need to know about this country..."

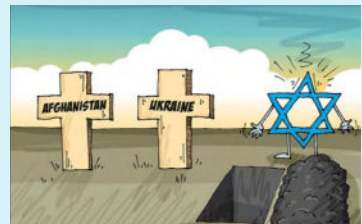


Figure 16: January 18, 2024

"What does the U.S. want from Israel? Does it expect that we will trade victory in the war for American assistance"



Figure 17: March 3, 2024

"The U.S. is pushing Israel toward annihilation by supporting Palestinian militants. By applying pressure on Tel Aviv, the current American leader is supporting Ukraine to hold on to his job in Washington..."

sober about their alliance with the Americans and look for new allies, such as Russia [title page illustration]. In practice, the United States mobilized in an unprecedented manner to help Israel from the first day of the war (by supplying weapons, transferring military forces to the Middle East, messages of deterrence to Iran, and providing Israel with a \$14 billion aid package), and for months repelled efforts to force a ceasefire on Israel at the UN Security Council (promoted among others by Russia).

As the U.S. prepared to help Israel defend itself against a large-scale Iranian missile attack in April 2024, Russia publicly justified Iran's right to attack Israel with missiles and the Russian campaign in Israel portrayed the U.S. as warmongering between Israel and Iran [Figure 19].

Many European countries, despite their criticism of Israel's policy, pleasantly surprised Jerusalem (particularly in the first month of the war) with forceful backing of Israel or by showing understanding of its situation.⁵⁴ In contrast, Russian messaging distorted this reality. While Russian narratives in Israel emphasized insufficient support from the West, its messaging in Europe and Ukraine conveyed the opposite: that all American financial and military resources were being diverted to Israel, and there would be no money left for Ukraine [Figure 18].⁵⁵

The SDA campaign in Israel has focused heavily on the United States presidential election campaign (its major issue since summer 2024). The SDA interference campaign in Israel portrayed the Biden administration's Middle East policy as motivated exclusively by narrow election considerations, pursuing the Arab-Muslim vote, and willing to sacrifice Israel. The campaign's operators sought to present an imminent and inevitable political upheaval in Washington and to encourage American Jews to refrain from voting for the



Figure 18: February 2, 2024

"Europe and the U.S. decided on a plan: boycotting Israel. They give every possible assistance – but just to Ukraine. They need us to surrender..."



Figure 19: April 7, 2024

"Turning Israel into dust. Who is pushing Tel Aviv and Tehran into open confrontation?"



Figure 20: July 12, 2023

"Hot news from a sociological survey in New York: Why American Jews are ready to abandon old traditions and influence the distribution of power on November 5?"

Democrats [Figure 20]. This was part of a broad global campaign against Biden, aimed also at the Israeli public [Figure 21].

Against the backdrop of tensions between the Biden administration and the Netanyahu government over the conduct of the war in Gaza, a November 1, 2023 leak (probably by White House officials) noted that Biden believed that Netanyahu's days as prime minister were numbered.⁵⁶ On November 4, Doppelganger began disseminating extensively (simultaneously through a large number of Facebook bots) a message in Hebrew, "Can Israel be considered independent if the Americans fire its leader?" [Figure 22]. At the same time, the Doppelganger French-language campaign circulated messages against replacing Netanyahu.⁵⁷ Behind this facet of the campaign was Russia's interest in undermining the status of the United States, and negatively portraying the Biden administration in the eyes of both the French and Israelis as an administration that interferes in domestic affairs and abandons its allies.

While Doppelganger simultaneously used a large number of "bots" and messages as part of a Hebrew campaign on Facebook during the first months of the war, in March-May 2024, the network used only a few bots per day. However, it regularly updated its messaging. April was particularly tense, starting with the assassination of an Iranian general in Syria, continuing with a large-scale Iranian missile attack on Israeli territory, and an Israeli retaliatory attack on Iran. The month ended with the United States Congress approving a

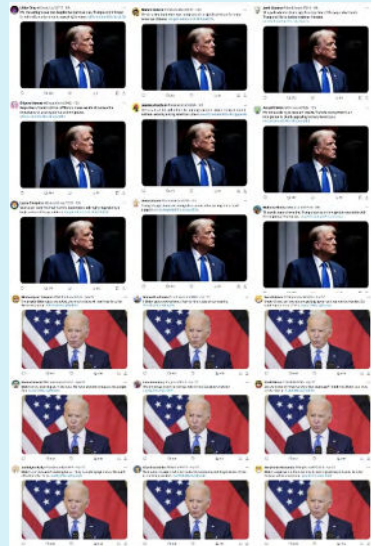


Figure 21: April 26-27.2.2024

The Global campaign in favor of Trump and against Biden on Twitter/X, tuned with the Israeli campaign. Courtesy of "bot blocker" X Channel.

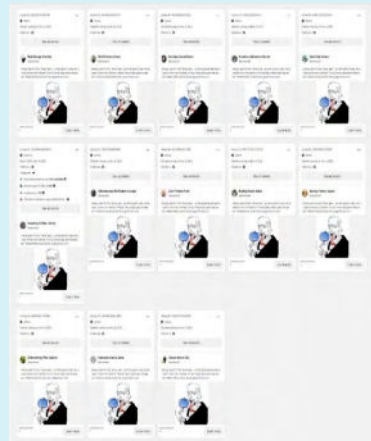


Figure 22: November 4, 2023

13 bots spreading similar messages in Hebrew, claiming Biden tries to depose Netanyahu.

military aid package for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan after months of delays. All these events were addressed as part of the Doppelganger campaign [e.g., Figures 19, 31 and title page illustration].

Three long texts in Hebrew (April 17 and 19, 2024) masquerading as the popular Israeli *Walla* website site warned Israel not to retaliate against Iran and encouraged Jerusalem to end its exchange of blows with Tehran without responding to the missile attack on its territory. They emphasized the high cost of the interceptors used to thwart missile attack against Israel earlier that month and claimed that it could not afford a repeat such scenario). It stated that Israel could not defend itself by itself, that it could not rely on the United States and the West, and that it needed to seek new allies such as Russia or China. The articles repeated false claims that the White House finances demonstrations in Israel. Graphics used in the articles were also part of Doppelganger's English campaign on Twitter/X, some of which dealt with identical topics.⁵⁸ After Congress approved aid to Israel and Ukraine, the Russian campaign sought to portray it as insufficient and motivated by American political considerations.⁵⁹



On June 2-3, 2024, there was a spike in Doppelganger's Hebrew-language messages on Facebook: 16 bots simultaneously posted 7 different messages [Figure 23]: Israel has no more space to bury soldiers; disaster is coming; professionals are leaving Israel; Russian electronic warfare has succeeded in accurately targeting Western missiles in Ukraine and this will affect Israel as well; the United States is duplicitous, imposing strict restrictions on Israel during the Gaza war; Biden is "flirting with the Arab community" and thus getting himself into trouble; and in the presidential election he is expected to lose both Jewish and Democratic support because of his policies on the Palestinian issue. Finally, Doppelganger published a geopolitical analysis indicating that while Israel is having trouble winning the war by itself, the U.S. may turn its back on Israel. Therefore, Israel should welcome Russia mediation with Iran and Syria.

Russia's disinformation campaign main messages were: Israel is weak, abandoned by its unreliable American partners, Russia has the ability to do harm, and, at the same time, positive relations with Moscow have benefits. The reason for this surge in Facebook activity may have been Russia's desire to respond to the positive coverage of President Biden's May 31 statement on a plan to end the Gaza war and statements from the Israeli Prime Minister's Office acknowledging that the plan was coordinated with Israel.

COPING WITH WESTERN COUNTERMEASURES IN JULY-SEPTEMBER 2024

As noted, in July 2024, several reports exposed the architecture of Doppelganger's Internet domain infrastructure. Subsequently, a significant part of the operation was shut down, including fake clones of Israeli media outlets, *Walla!* and *Liberal*.⁶⁰ In September 2024, the U.S. seized additional Doppelganger domains, including *Holyland Herald*, an outlet pretending to be an English-speaking Israeli website. Hebrew-language *Omnam* and English-language, *The Forward* and *HaModia* clones continued operating, but were shut down by the end of October 2024.

Since July 2024, Doppelganger's Facebook operation has dramatically diminished the number of Hebrew messages and has been conducted mainly in English. Previously, Hebrew posts were published almost daily. Text formats have also changed: instead of plain text, the SDA employed trickery to obstruct automatic pattern recognition by social network operators with combatting clandestine political messaging on the platform [Figures 28 and 29]. This new format apparently leads to much less interaction with authentic users.

In October 2024, the campaign also started using Reddit, Pinterest and Instagram social networks for its messages, probably as an alternative to Facebook's harsher content supervision. This was executed clumsily, with messages in English (for the U.S. and the Israeli public), German, French and Polish being posted by the same bots side by side [Figure 24]. The new channels didn't provide those messages more interaction with authentic users, and the Russian bot-users observed by the author were shut down there in a matter of days or hours.

Ahead of the Paris Olympic Games, Doppelganger staged a fake digital operation threatening athletes, including Israelis, supposedly on behalf of Muslim radicals, with AI generated videos calling for "revenge." This was as a part of a broad Russian campaign to disrupt the Olympics.⁶¹

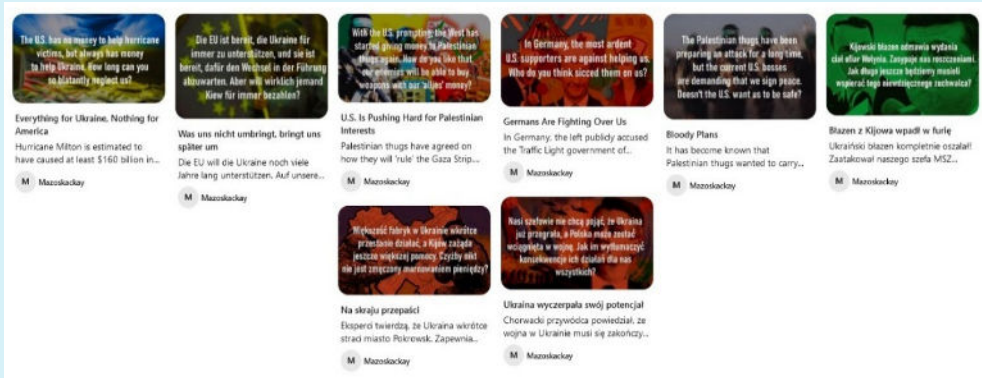


Figure 24: October 19, 2024

Doppelganger's bot on Pinterest posts eight messages simultaneously in English (aimed at the U.S. and Israel), German and Polish

During August 2024, the U.S. deployed a large military force in the Middle East to coerce Iran to refrain from reprisal for the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Hezbollah senior commander Fuad Shukr in Beirut, but Doppelganger continued to promote the narrative that Washington is betraying Israel.

In the run-up to November 2024, the presidential race became more central to Doppelganger's targeting of Israeli and Jewish audiences. The campaign created a positive image of Donald Trump, while attacking the Democratic Party, Vice President Harris, and President Biden.

SDA ATTEMPTS TO BREAK OUT FROM THE DIGITAL DOMAIN

Leaked SDA documents attest that its staff thought that there are limits as to what can be achieved through social media digital campaigning without "boots on the ground," and proposed "real-world" activities in Israel. In early 2023, it suggested establishing a political party in Israel based on Russian immigrants in the country, hoping that it could win three to four seats in Israel's 120-seat parliament – potentially a powerful balancing faction in Israel's deadlocked politics. It also considered establishing some kind of "Israeli office," which would cost an estimated 1.2 million dollars. The campaign's "creative" team proposed spraying provocative graffiti in Arab neighborhoods in Israel, supposedly on behalf of Jewish right-wing extremists. SDA suggested distributing leaflets in synagogues and churches in Israel, as a part of a global campaign depicting Ukraine as an anti-Christian state.⁶²

In October 2023, Doppelganger circulated messages that graffiti of Stars of David were painted on an apartment building in Paris (French intelligence believes this was done by agents working on behalf of Russia), ostensibly in preparation for a pogrom against the Jews of Paris.⁶³ In May 2024, A Holocaust memorial in Paris was defaced with “blood-red hands” (this was interpreted as evoking the lynch of two IDF reservists in Ramallah in 2000). Once again, Russia was the prime suspect behind the provocation. Doppelganger circulated the footage extensively in France, accusing President Macron of inaction in the face of an antisemitic rampage at a sensitive time in the run-up to elections for the European Parliament [Figure 25].⁶⁴

In November 2023, Doppelganger branches (in French, German, and English) distributed a video and photos attributed to a Turkish group, the Grey Wolves, hinting that it intened to kill athletes at the Paris Olympics. It used a graffiti referring to the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Games in Munich.⁶⁵

Besides passively monitoring and amplifying local influencers, the "Normal Israel" project suggested employing "reporters in Israel." Beginning at the end of 2023, a series of articles appeared in major Israeli media outlets (*Walla*, *The Jerusalem Post*, and Channel 13 TV), promoting Russian narratives on political issues. They were disguised as objective reporting, though they were published as "sponsored advertisements." Some of them were distributed as part of the Doppelganger campaign on Facebook and Twitter/X. Journalistic investigations revealed that these publications were commissioned by Russian citizens from an Israeli media person (of Russian origin), who refused to reveal the identity of his customers.⁶⁶ Another Israeli Russian-speaking blogger had his YouTube videos distributed by Doppelganger (with limited numbers of viewers). Without claiming that these Israeli influencers knowingly collaborated with Doppelganger, these incidents at least illustrate that certain “reporters” operate in Israel in the service of the Russian disinformation campaign.

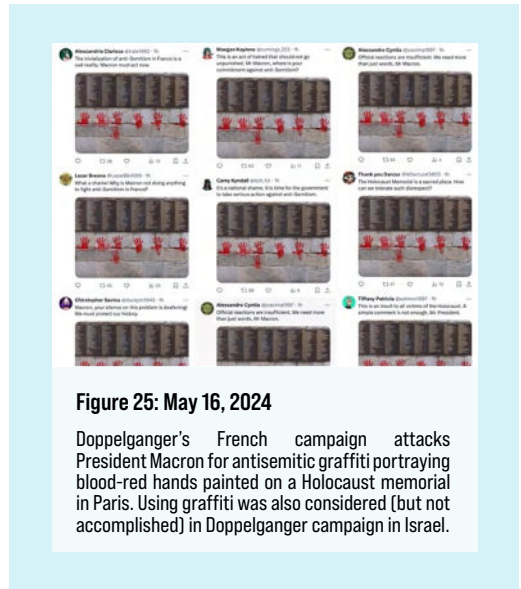


Figure 25: May 16, 2024

Doppelganger's French campaign attacks President Macron for antisemitic graffiti portraying blood-red hands painted on a Holocaust memorial in Paris. Using graffiti was also considered (but not accomplished) in Doppelganger campaign in Israel.

WHY DID RUSSIA STEP UP ITS INFORMATION WARFARE CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISRAEL IN 2023?

Prior to the war in Ukraine, it was evident that despite all the tools at Moscow's disposal in Israel, the Russian influence campaign was conducted at a low intensity in comparison to Moscow's campaigns in other Western countries. Russia did not establish any dedicated direct communication channels to transmit its messages in Hebrew to the Israeli public, although it operated many such channels in different languages in other countries. Before the war in Ukraine, Russian state media voiced almost no direct criticism of Israel and its leadership, and the Russian Foreign Ministry adopted a moderate approach to controversial Israeli policies, such as its response to the Iranian nuclear program, Israeli attacks in Syria, or the Palestinian issue.

This moderate attitude (before the invasion of Ukraine) stemmed from the Kremlin's perception of Israel as a "friendly country." President Vladimir Putin's close relationship with Prime Ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett contributed to this Russian approach to Israel. Even when Russia adopted an aggressive information campaign against Israel, it was conducted for short periods, such as during the crisis that followed the downing of the Russian plane in Syria (2018)⁶⁷ or the Naama Issachar affair (2019).⁶⁸ In these cases, Putin and Netanyahu were able to reach understandings and calm tensions.

In the wake of the war in Ukraine, Jerusalem and Moscow grew apart,⁶⁹ and Russia feared a further deterioration in relations could endanger its interests vis-à-vis Israel. On the one hand, Israel refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia, canceling aviation links, and supplying weapons to Ukraine. On the other hand, Israel condemned the Russian invasion, voted against Russia at the UN General Assembly, and provided Ukraine with humanitarian assistance. Since 2022, Moscow has seen Israel as subject to Western pressure to transfer military equipment to Ukraine and downgrade its ties with Russia.

Moreover, the intimate political dialogue between President Putin and Israeli Prime Ministers Netanyahu and Bennett was interrupted in the summer of 2022 when Yair Lapid – who was perceived by Moscow as anti-Russian – became prime minister as part of a rotation with Bennett. Netanyahu returned to the prime minister's office at the end of December 2022, but the dialogue was not renewed and there were no direct calls between the leaders of the two countries until October 16, 2023.⁷⁰ The dialogue resumed at the initiative of Russia in the wake of the October 7 attacks but has remained limited in scope and frequency.

The rapid rupture of Moscow's ties with Western countries following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced Russia to update the model of influence over them. Previously, the Russian security services played a central role in conducting information warfare. The Russian military's poor performance in 2022 and reduced space for Russian spies in the West due to the mass expulsion of intelligence personnel under diplomatic cover created a void into which civilian and government-affiliated entities found their way. Influence campaign experts who dealt with the Russian domestic arena – SDA, Structura, Ano-Dialog and others – were eager to create new mechanisms for influence over Western publics and governments.

As Kiriyenko expanded his information warfare activities beyond the borders of Russia, and the SDA sought new arenas for its thriving new business, Israel, in early 2023, seemed an attractive arena for operations. Israel was considered an important country for Russia because of potential common interests with Moscow. Despite being a part of the American camp, it was seen as willing to confront Washington occasionally. The weakening of Moscow's other levers of influence over Jerusalem against the background of the war in Ukraine created high demand for interference campaigning. Moreover, in the mindset of Putin's Russia, circumstances of social polarization and the fierce struggle over Israel's judicial reform seemed to Moscow to be a perfect parallel to the Ukraine of 2014 during the anti-Russian revolution. These circumstances made it easier to "market" to the Kremlin the need to launch an interference campaign in Israel.

BEHIND THE SCENES OF A DISINFORMATION FACTORY

In its early 2023 proposal for the "Normal Israel" project, SDA estimated that within six months, it would achieve a following of about half a million people in Israel and the United States. To this end, SDA proposed that all the content it created be posted in three languages (Hebrew, English, and Russian) and operate in six social media platforms parallel to clone and proprietary websites. The system, described as the "Comments Machine," was supposed to imitate authentic user engagement to affect the social networks' algorithms and produce viral dispersion. Political cartoons were presented as a force multiplier to encourage interest in SDA products. The proposed project's cover story was that it was operated by "energetic activists" from Israel, some of whom preferred not to reveal their identities. The initial proposal suggested refraining from "augmented reality" (an SDA euphemism for forging fake narratives, documents and media) in the initial stage so as to earn credibility in the eyes of the Israeli public.⁷¹ Yet later versions of the project did not hesitate to employ such "augmented reality."⁷²

The Doppelganger campaign in Israel does not in reality operate through all these channels, and it is doubtful whether it managed to reach half a million Israelis a month. At the same time, the campaign is active on Twitter and Facebook, conveying messages in Hebrew, English, and occasionally in Russian and Arabic. Political cartoons became a central component of the campaign in Israel until SDA reduced their use in Israel in May 2024.

The "Normal Israel" proposal elaborated that the project team is supposed to list ten different professional teams:

- Management
- Media monitoring
- Social media monitoring, to identify appropriate statements by influencers
- Research team, also in the field of public opinion
- Creative team, to define what content needs to be produced, promote "special tasks" and generate fakes
- Production team – texts, images, and videos (following the creative team's guidelines)
- "Exclusive reporters in Israel"
- Translation bureau
- Distribution team to create text messages and comments on social networks
- Control and reporting team to gather statistics and prepare reports

Doppelganger's persistent interference campaigns required SDA/"Structura" to organize a mass-production mechanism, having high occupational professionalization (as emphasized by the above list of teams employed)⁷³ and sophisticated technological infrastructure.⁷⁴ SDA internal documents claimed that in January-April 2024, it generated 34 million comments, 40,000 "content units" (i.e., posts, "longreads" or sponsored ads) on social media, and thousands of videos, memes, and graphics.⁷⁵

The industrial-scale operation of the Doppelganger campaign is illustrated by an increase in the number of languages, the duplication of the content produced (graphics, texts, and video) from one campaign to another, a common technological infrastructure, and the ability to coordinate and synchronize the dissemination of messages at an intensive pace in a large number of dynamic arenas.

On Facebook, Hebrew and English posts are distributed as paid advertisements (main message, image/cartoon, and sometimes a link to websites impersonating major media outlets in Israel or videos). The messages on Twitter/X, Reddit, Pinterest and Instagram follow a similar pattern, and the Doppelganger-controlled network of bots redistributes and responds to messages to create a semblance of interest.

To lend credibility to the messages, Doppelganger uses names of well-known Israeli figures. For example, in April-June 2024, the Hebrew campaign circulated several links to a Russian-speaking Israeli blogger who recommended watching edited interview clips of retired Israeli security officials who presented comfortable positions for Russia, both in the Middle East context and in connection with the war in Ukraine.⁷⁶ Doppelganger promoted a large number of tweets with a picture of a retired general, Amir Avivi, head of the Israel Defense and Security Forum (*HaBitchonistim*), including a link to an edited segment of an interview with him in which he hinted that Ukraine needs to compromise with Russia [Figure 26].⁷⁷

Internal SDA documents about the planned campaigns in Ukraine,⁷⁸ Israel,⁷⁹ U.S.⁸⁰

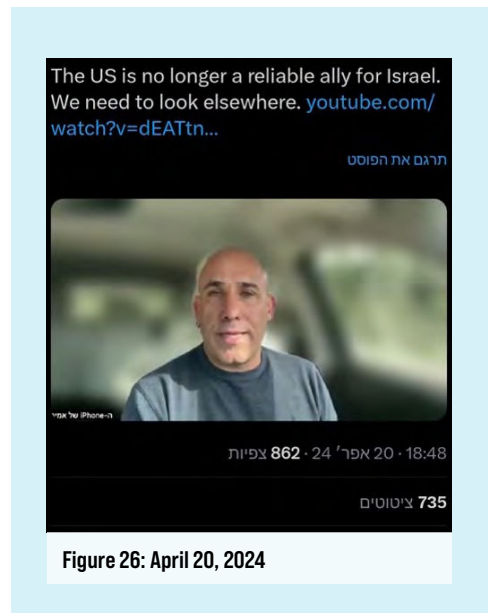


Figure 26: April 20, 2024

and Latin America⁸¹ show similar operational patterns. For example, there were similarities in the graphic language employed in SDA's political cartoons in Israel, France, and Germany (and sometimes the same illustrations are reused, see Figure 27). Still, for the most part, there is a graphic language differentiation between the Twitter/X and the Facebook operations. In May–October 2024, Doppelganger stopped the use of distinct and easily detectable cartoons in its Facebook operation in Israel [Figure 24]. This was likely carried out to hamper the identification of its messages and prevent their deleting.

Quotas for final products and time limits for their production were set for all Doppelganger campaigns. The "Normal Israel" campaign planned for four articles per day for each clone website, 20 posts in social networks, 300 comments, three cartoons/memes, and three videos a week.⁸² Doppelganger deployed both artificial intelligence tools (to create a variety of titles, texts and images)⁸³ and manpower to produce large quantities of unique content.

The scope of investment in each arena/country and the issues covered by the interference campaigns vary and are adjusted according to the operators' assessment of the situation. The messages of various campaigns still available on Facebook during the research period show an investment of small sums – tens of dollars to a few hundred dollars per user/"bot" for a few days. Each "bot" could yield, under optimal conditions, up to tens of thousands of views for a single advertised post (if virality is created). Most of the posts in Israel are much less successful (dozens to a few hundreds of interactions per post).

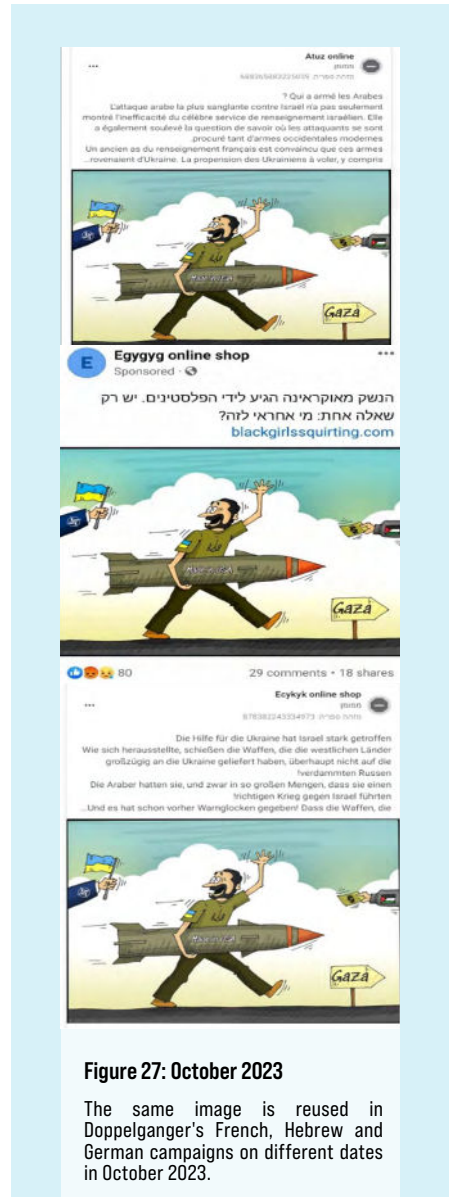


Figure 27: October 2023

The same image is reused in Doppelganger's French, Hebrew and German campaigns on different dates in October 2023.

Reach can be controlled by increasing the number of users posting similar messages and investing more money in marketing. Recent research suggests that the volume of sponsored advertising in France and Germany increased ahead of their governments' decisions on aid to Ukraine and shrank after these decisions had been made. The "Bot blocker" Twitter/X channel claimed that anti-Israeli Doppelganger posts on Twitter/X during the Paris Olympics got 10 million views in 24 hours.⁸⁴

SDA and Structura's profitability skyrocketed in 2022, when the two began operating interference campaigns in Europe. Structura's revenues increased seven-fold compared to 2021 (to some 75 million rubles, about \$800,000), and SDA's revenues increased four-fold (to about 73 million rubles, just under \$800,000) – these amounts do not necessarily reflect all the income/expenses of managing the interference campaigns. Data for 2023 show a drop in revenue for SDA (to some 3.5 million rubles, \$38,000) and Structura (to 40 million rubles, some \$430,000). This drop may indicate that after European sanctions were imposed on the two companies (and ahead of the possibility of U.S. sanctions, which were finally imposed in early 2024), financial activity was transferred to alternative economic entities, less exposed to sanctions.⁸⁵ SDA/Structura are just two of many players operating in Russia in the "foreign influence/interference industry," demonstrating functional capability, adaptability to the U.S. and EU counter-efforts, and a sustainable economic model.

Doppelganger's activity in Israel is less intensive than its European campaigns, but it is continuous and up-to-date, and it creates a learning experience for Russian campaign operators. The rough evaluation of the operational cost of the interference campaign in Israel might be up to hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, with several dozen people involved (most of them dealing in parallel with other countries).

It is evident that beyond the geopolitical considerations that feed the Russian campaign in Israel, there is also an economic-bureaucratic dynamic behind it: officials in the PA who seek to demonstrate to Putin just how active they are, and contractors (SDA/Structura/ANO-Dialog) seeking to "make a buck" without special concern for morality, the effectiveness of their operations and the consequences for socio-political stability in Israel.

If the Kremlin requires, the intensity of the Doppelganger campaign in Israel can quickly increase. For instance, a greater number of bots may be activated, payment for sponsored content may increase, or the Hebrew-language campaign may be moved to other social networks where Doppelganger is active. Moreover, the campaign can be launched in

conjunction with other interference efforts, including outside the digital space or similar digital campaigns by other Russian actors.

COUNTERING THE DOPPELGANGER CAMPAIGN

In legitimate marketing campaigns, advertisers identify themselves by name and are wary of offering blatantly false information for fear of libel suits and reputational damage. In contrast, the organizers of a Doppelganger-style political interference campaign disguise their identity and see fake news as a central tool in undermining credibility and in promoting disorientation in society to weaken target countries.⁸⁶ Despite Facebook's guidelines, the Doppelganger operators do not declare their content as having a political context.

Doppelganger encounters a variety of Western efforts to limit or stop the distribution of its messages. Governmental, corporate, and civil society research and investigative bodies expose Doppelganger's activities and update the public and authorities of their findings. Government publications on the Doppelganger network employ "naming and shaming" tactics. The Biden Administration introduced an innovative domain seizure procedure as the U.S. presidential elections approached.⁸⁷ The European Union, the United States and other western-imposed sanctions on SDA, ANO-Dialog, Structura, and the owners of these entities in 2023 and 2024. Tech companies and intelligence agencies work to remove user networks and bots, shut down servers and employ various other means to create obstacles for the disinformation campaigners.

However, SDA employs increasingly sophisticated counter-efforts to conceal its operations and ensure their survivability. Facebook removes fictitious users ("bots") operated by the network within hours. In response, SDA/Structura operate a "farm" that specializes in creating a constant output of fictitious users – if they manage to survive even a day, that justifies the expense for the operators.⁸⁸ Additionally, through its posts, SDA explores the fine line that Facebook draws between a non-political message and a political one that can be banned. The bot network on Twitter/X distributes unique disposable links to content produced for the campaign. Clicking on the link will take the unaware user through several servers to obscure the network's tracks.⁸⁹ Bots are given random nicknames that make it more challenging for the social media platforms to identify them.

The campaign operators avoid using the names of politicians and countries in their texts to make it difficult to search for keywords. Messages are conveyed through images or generic

terms such as "the leader," or "our leader's opponent." Artificial intelligence technologies are employed to create different texts that hinder distinguishing common patterns. During the summer of 2024, Facebook posts by the campaign featured patterns resembling cyber-crime "phishing" techniques.⁹⁰ While writing in English (for Israeli users), Lao language Romanized symbols were used [Figure 28], obstructing the social network's ability to find searchable text strings. Such a technique seemed unwelcoming for the reader. It was soon abandoned in favor of truncating the words with periods [Figure 29] or separating each letter with spaces – both in English and Hebrew. Currently, the most common technique is a short text superimposed on graphics [Figure 29].

There is a disagreement among researchers regarding the efficiency of social networks in identifying and blocking Doppelganger's messages. In October 2023, information warfare researchers suggested that the Russian campaign operators' learning curve makes it difficult for even large international corporations such as Meta to expose and dismantle their interference operations. In April 2024, AI Forensics researchers claimed that Facebook was unable to identify and neutralize 95% of funded political content in EU countries – despite its legal obligation to restrict the spread of political messages. Researchers from Reset estimated that Doppelganger's bot network is five to ten times larger than previously estimated and that between January and February 2024, its messages reached about 128 million users in 10 EU countries.⁹¹

In July-September 2024 a series of exposures and legal actions hurt Doppelganger harshly. On July 11, 2024, the Swedish media foundation Qurium and the German investigative journalism organization CORRECTIV published a report that dissected Doppelganger's web domains and bot user network. It outlined the interference campaign's practices to conceal its IT infrastructure in the EU



Figure 28: July 21, 2024

The English text (below) is written in Romanized Lao script (the same text is pasted into MS Word, above).



Figure 29: September 17, 2024

The words are cut into pieces by periods, spaces and emojis.

and Asia. Following the exposure, some domain hosters succumbed to public pressure and shut down a significant part of SDA/Structura domains, including fake clones of Israeli websites. The Russian operators rushed to reorganize their servers⁹² in parallel to a continued large-scale interference campaign in the U.S. and the E.U..

On September 4, 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) seized further Doppelganger domains, including the English-language *Holyland Herald*, pretending to be an Israeli news site. The seizure was accompanied by the publication of a 277-page affidavit by the FBI, which, based on intelligence collection, laid down a granular description of the Russian campaign's goals and modus operandi. Most of the affidavit is dedicated to 12 internal SDA documents. The legal trigger for the domain's seizure was Doppelganger's infringement of trademarks of established media websites by producing fake clones of these sites (as well as election interference).⁹³

In November 2024, CORRECTIV published a further analysis of Doppelganger's distribution chain, and used it to pressure European companies involved in it to shut down the Russian campaign's ability to redirect users from social networks to Doppelganger's fake sites. CORRECTIV's investigative journalists considered the report to have dealt a significant blow to Doppelganger's operations. They further identified potential collaboration between SDA/Structura and the Russian Ministry of Defense.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, Operation Overload, also known as Operation Matryoshka, – another Russian disinformation network – rather than Doppelganger appeared to have played a primary role during the critical final days of the U.S. election campaign. This shift could indicate that Doppelganger suffered significant operational damage. Nevertheless, SDA/Structura did not cease its activities and there is even a hypothesis that it may have hidden behind the Operation Overload/Matryoshka campaign.⁹⁵

Political and technological countermeasures are indeed challenging the Russian campaign's operators. However, the cybercrime international ecosystem allows the Russians to recover quickly. On September 10, less than a week after the DOJ seizure of the Doppelganger domains, its Twitter/X bots network worked hard to portray Trump as the winner of the TV debate with Harris.⁹⁶

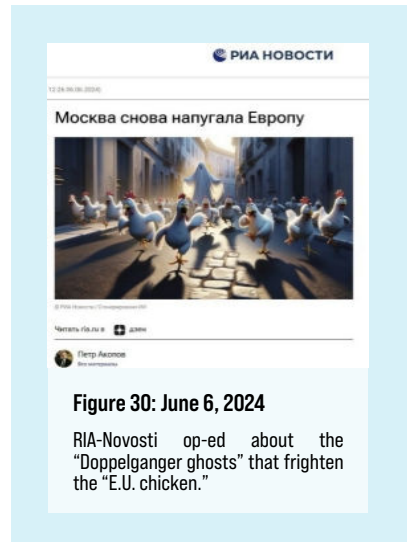
Additionally, "naming and shaming" tactics have limitations and might be counterproductive because negative publicity is considered an achievement for interference campaign operators. Russian entities have limited assets in the West and are not significantly exposed to the risk of sanctions. However, Russian citizens who are subjected to Western sanctions are honored and receive huge economic benefits in Putin's Russia – a gesture of

appreciation for the personal price they have paid in their operations "for the homeland."⁹⁷

Thousands of SDA documents reached the western media and researchers, but only a handful describe presentation of Doppelganger's achievements to President Putin. It is unclear if it happened or whether SDA's weekly activity reports prepared for Kiriyenko were indeed shown to Putin. It would be safe to assume that Putin is aware of Doppelganger's activity but is not involved directly in management of the operation. On the other hand, the documents show that Kiriyenko's aides, Kharichev and Zakharova, give elaborate creative suggestions to SDA and are probably very happy to see their ideas implemented and distributed globally.⁹⁸

In July 2023, Israeli intelligence officials demanded that Russia cease its interference operations in Israel.⁹⁹ However, the campaign continues to operate to this day. A search of Facebook's ads library (the primary distribution channel for disseminating the campaign's messages in Israel) found that only a few of the approximately 400 messages on which this study is based are still available for search. As for the Facebook messages that the author was directly exposed to during the months of the study, most of them became unavailable within less than a day of their appearance. Facebook-Meta has removed them and may yet remove the items that are still available in the future. These items may have been removed at the request of Israeli security officials; Facebook-Meta has not removed thousands of similar Doppelganger messages in French or German that appeared months ago.¹⁰⁰

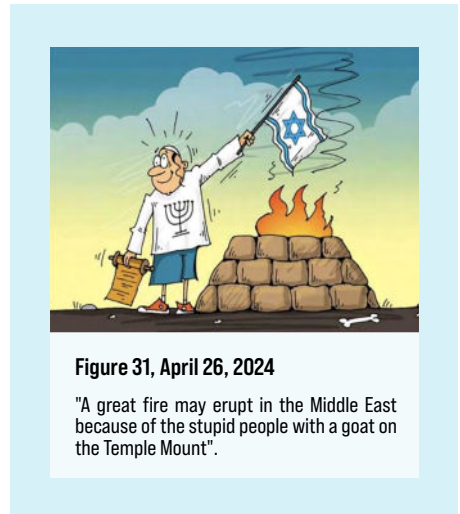
A trend of cultural adaptation and improvement among the SDA operators in Israel is identifiable but not stable. First, up until the summer of 2024, the author and a fellow researcher observed a steady increase in interactions and redistributions by real Israeli users (not bots) to the Russian campaign messages on Facebook [Figure 30]. However, during summer-autumn 2024, in the wake of SDA/Structura attempts to cope with Meta's limitations on political ads, the Doppelganger posts look artificial, and there are almost no positive reactions to the campaign's content from authentic users. Yet, almost every Doppelganger post on Facebook gets angry feedbacks by authentic users describing it as a "Russian bot."



Second, the campaign correctly identifies and plays on the exposed nerves and rifts in Israeli society and politics. The primary modus operandi of the campaign is to locate local content that promotes Russian interests and to increase its circulation, with limited additions of information (genuine or fake). Russia's desire to distance Israel from the United States and the West finds a receptive audience among Israelis who express their displeasure with the Biden administration.

The right-wing/conservative camp in Israel is receptive to criticism of the U.S. and faces a persistent Russian effort to manipulate its perception of reality. The challenge faced by this group in Israel is similar to that of conservatives in the United States and Western countries.

The attempts by the Russian campaign in Israel to portray its messages as a right-wing discourse are cynical attempts to sow discord. Depending on the needs of the "client," the Russian campaign may also harm right wing objectives (as it did, for example, on April 26, 2024, when it warned that an attempt to bring a goat up to the Temple Mount [for sacrifice] could lead to a regional conflagration) [Figure 31]. At the same time, in 2023, the Russians published an extremist anti-Israeli text in Arabic and generated antisemitic memes.¹⁰¹ The SDA's campaign outside Israel sought to undermine the legitimacy of the Israeli government's political and military moves and attempted to put it at odds with its Western allies. Conflicts of interest between Russia and the right-wing government in Jerusalem could lead to direct attacks on Israel, as happened when a Russian plane was downed in Syria and in the case of Naama Issachar. The Russian state media and senior Russian diplomats also harshly criticize Israel on a daily basis.¹⁰²



Third, there has been a period of improvement in the campaign operators' command of Hebrew. Initially, in Doppelganger's posts in Hebrew, the language was inarticulate and often seemed to be a literal translation from Russian. In recent months, there have been almost no Facebook posts in Hebrew, and the Omnam site was obviously being updated through low-quality machine translation (until it was shut down in September or October 2024). SDA documents revealed that the organization had one Hebrew translator, who

might have been living in Israel. This detail reveals attempts to enlist collaborators in Israel, and SDA's lack of a deep cultural understanding of Israel.¹⁰³

Fourth, change is observable in graphic messages. Initially, the SDA creative team used antisemitic motifs in their early posts: Jews/Israelis were portrayed as ultra-Orthodox figures, depicted in an unflattering manner, for example, against the background of gold coins (Figures 2, 4, and 21). There was an overuse of swastikas and Nazi symbols (Figures 1, 2, and 8) – which, for most Israelis, is blasphemous and off-putting and did not add credibility to the promoted content.

The graphic language was sometimes incomprehensible to the average Israeli (for example, the representation of Ukraine by the figure of a bald Cossack [Figure 32], the trident [Figure 33], the Ukrainian national coat of arms, and even a pig). Currently, the use of figures with antisemitic motifs has decreased, and the use of symbols that are more understandable to the average Israeli has increased. However, the illustrations often remain incomprehensible. The decreasing use of cartoons, identified from May–June, may also be part of the cultural adaptation of the campaign [Figure 24].



Figure 32, August 15, 2023

"...Israel won't spend money on the Ukrainians. It is so important that our leaders now understand this. I agree that there is no reason to expect gratitude from the Ukrainians..."



Figure 33, January 16, 2024

"Ukraine has become our ugly shadow. Either we get rid of it, or it will swallow us...". The message is identical to one in Figure 13, but the image is different.

HAS THE DOPPELGANGER CAMPAIGN SUCCEEDED IN INFLUENCING ISRAEL?

The overall impression is that the direct impact of the Doppelganger campaign in Israel is quite limited, though it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion. Meta determined in September 2023 that Doppelganger is the most extensive and most aggressive and persistent campaign it has encountered since 2017.¹⁰⁴ Summer 2024 reports about Doppelganger's attempts to influence the EU Parliamentary elections of June 2024 and the campaign ahead of the 2024 U.S. elections indeed draw a picture of the high intensity and volume of the campaign. Nevertheless, they assess it as ineffective in shifting results.¹⁰⁵ This raises the question: should Doppelganger be treated as a significant threat, or is it merely generating inconsequential noise?

Prolonged disinformation campaigns undermine public confidence in the reliability of information, weaken trust in state institutions, and promote social polarization.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, even communities accustomed to years of Russian disinformation streams sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between reliable and fake information, and vulnerability to fake information may vary between subgroups and different topics. For example, false claims presented as economic predictions (e.g., "the economic situation is bleak") may appear more credible than other types of disinformation.¹⁰⁷

The messages disseminated by the Russian interference campaigns is not intended to persuade or necessarily be consistent. The operators distribute a "menu" of narratives tailored to different target audiences, which are meant to influence diverse emotional mechanisms – provoking anger, identification, or even passivity and depression.¹⁰⁸ In the case of Doppelganger, the difference in narratives, from country to country, stems from an effort by the Russian campaign operators to create a variety of messages that reinforce conflicts to weaken the target countries from within or maintain a state of inability to make decisions that are not to Moscow's liking. The purpose of the interference campaign is not to rally supporters around an idea but rather to make it difficult to implement measures to Russia's detriment.

The recently leaked SDA documents reveal the obsession of Doppelganger campaign managers – and likely their clients as well – with monitoring and measuring campaign impact. Measuring the success of interference campaigns is complex: What constitutes an appropriate metric for success? What should be measured and what can be measured? Collecting vast amounts of data is costly, and, at times, virtually impossible, when the audience is at a state scale.¹⁰⁹

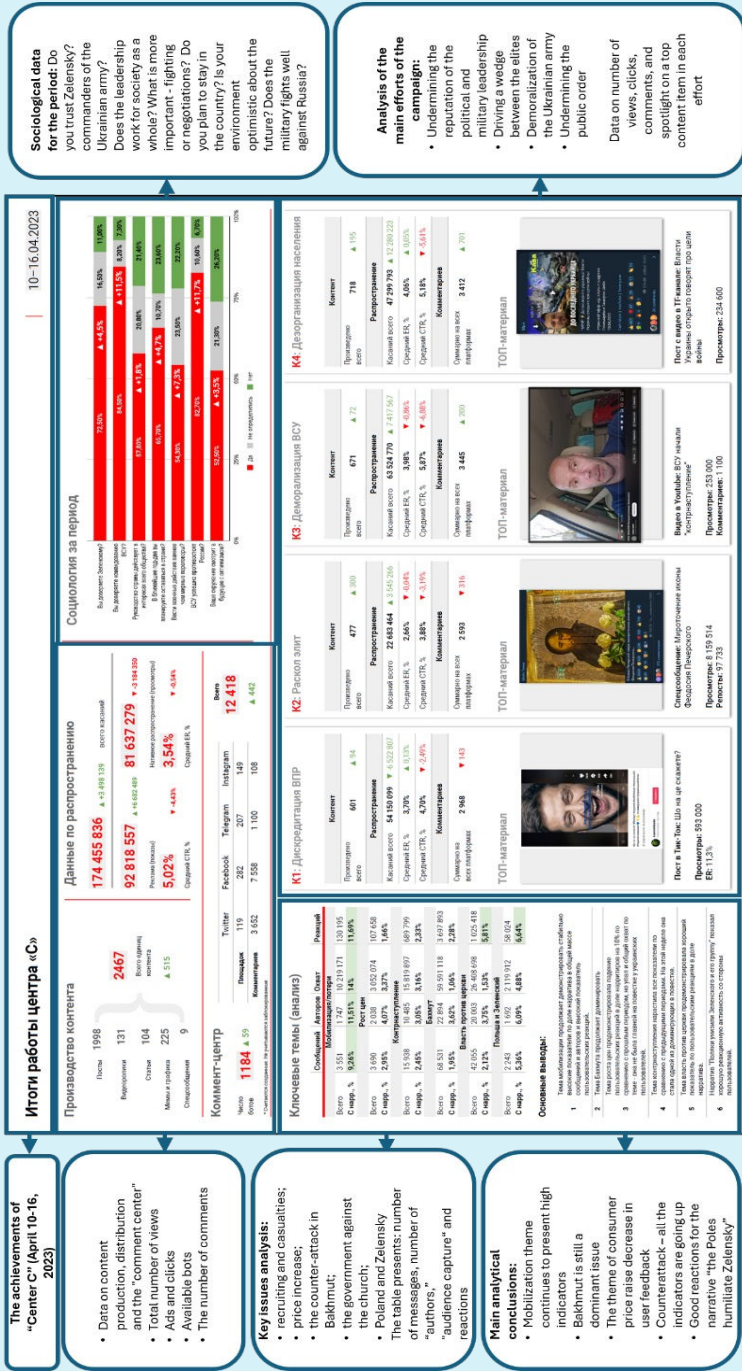


Figure 34: An example of an SDA weekly report on an influence campaign in Ukraine - how do they measure their success? Source: Catharin Belton, "Kremlin runs disinformation campaign to undermine Zelensky, documents show", *Washington Post*, 16 February 2024.

Doppelganger's “control and reporting team” prepares periodic reports [Figure 34] to track performance, update superiors, and make any necessary adjustments. These reports resemble tools used to conduct online marketing campaigns, and from them, we can learn about Russia’s goals and how their effectiveness is reported to the “client” in the Kremlin. The reports present the main focuses of each campaign, which are broken down into narratives, distribution channels, and various means of conveying messaging.¹¹⁰

SDA measures easy-to-collect parameters. It examines three primary parameters: the distribution data (views) of its posts, user interaction with the distributed content, and adversarial countermeasures. SDA's Israeli campaign is limited (in comparison to activity in France or Germany) when it comes to the number of users/"bots" distributing messages and the financial investment in marketing content. The Twitter/X channel "bot blocker," which focuses on monitoring Doppelganger activity, claims that activity directed at Israel amounted to 5.5–6 percent of the total messages of the entire network worldwide in November 2022 by May 2023¹¹¹ [Figure 35]. A German government report assessed in the summer of 2024 that less than 3 percent of Doppelganger’s content targets Israel.¹¹²

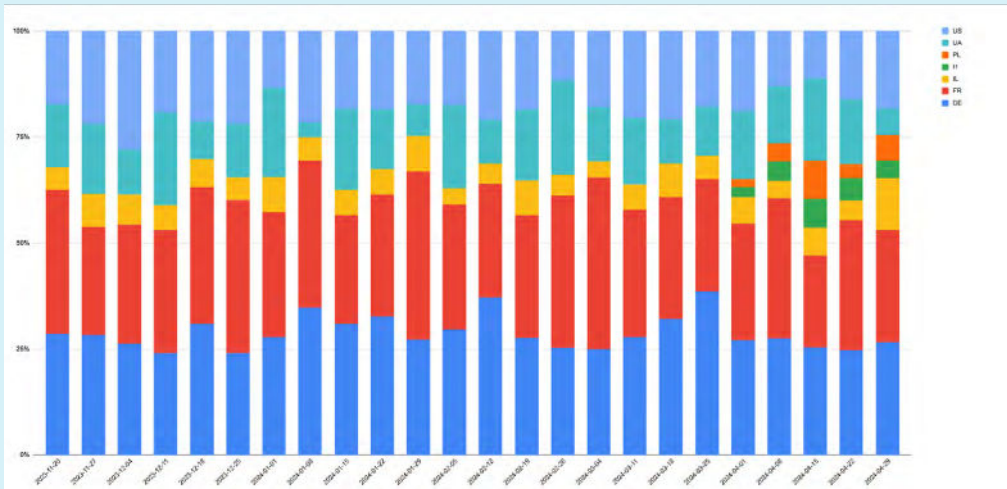


Figure 35: The percentage of fake articles produced by Doppelganger targeting various audiences by country. Israel (in yellow) - accounts for approximately 5.5%. The data is for November 20, 2023, through May 1, 2024. It is based on the articles whose links were distributed on the Twitter/X network only. Courtesy of “bot blocker” X Channel.

Technically, the Doppelganger campaign in Israel can reach hundreds of thousands of views per post/message. In March 2024, Twitter/X messages disseminated as part of Doppelganger's Hebrew campaign, accusing the United States and Ukraine of responsibility for the attack on the Crocus City Hall in Moscow (which was carried out by the Islamic State), received nearly 400,000 views. This is out of 15 million views worldwide.¹¹³ In May 2024, Doppelganger produced a global campaign with a viral video named "Bye Bye Biden" mocking the U.S. president. The video was made in Russia with considerable investment. During the campaign week, bots shared the Hebrew video nearly 200,000 times on Twitter/X.¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, the count stems from automatic bot amplification, which creates bias regarding the extent of the public's real interest in the content distributed. For example, many of Doppelganger's posts on Twitter/X show hundreds of reposts with a minuscule number of views. This combination implies artificial amplification without any broad interest from real people.¹¹⁵

In two years of activity in Israel, SDA didn't succeed in producing any major newsworthy event. It proved a generic capability to deliver large-scale engagement with the Israeli public, but it cannot attest to an attitude change among the target audience.

SDA also monitors and reports sociological data on public opinion. While pretending to monitor a change in the general population, they practically base their observations on analyzing the response patterns of social network consumers to Doppelganger's content. The description of the methodology leaves an impression that SDA produced a pseudo-scientific approach to reassure the PA client, Kiriyyenko – known for his preoccupation with numbers and performance indicators (KPIs) – of the productivity of their work.¹¹⁶

Changes in public opinion can be due to reasons that are unrelated to interference campaigns. The campaign might be responsible for a tiny part (if any), but the campaign operator may take credit for the entirety of the change (especially if this pleases the "client"). SDA reported to the Kremlin that it succeeded in influencing the EU Parliamentary elections with a surge in the power of the right-wing representatives, though this was an anticipated trend that was in no way connected to Doppelganger's campaigning.¹¹⁷ The campaign might have had some impact but isolating it with the Doppelganger polling toolbox seems improbable. An alarming development is mentioned in an internal SDA document from June 2024 that alludes to a French polling firm being used without its knowledge to poll the public, as a sanity check for SDA.¹¹⁸

In addition, SDA monitors publications, technical reports, enforcement and push-back measures by Western government agencies surrounding its activity. It collects evidence from pressure events and technical countermeasures to prove the effectiveness of its work, which will be presented to the PA. The Israeli security agency (most likely Shin Bet) is mentioned in the list of government agencies resisting Doppelganger ("The "collective West" countries are seriously concerned by the effectiveness of the project... and have been involved in the effort of countering our narratives").¹¹⁹

Only a tiny portion of the leaked SDA internal documents mention Israel. We don't know if the Israeli segment of the Doppelganger campaign is considered a success in the eyes of the SDA or the Kremlin. It may be perceived as successful and effective in the view of those who commissioned the project, even if SDA deliberately runs it on a limited scale.

- A. Use as an intimidation tool:** Perhaps the Kremlin's introduction of an interference campaign targeting Israel was intended merely to signal Moscow's capacity for damage to Jerusalem and to gain operational experience in navigating the Israeli digital battlefield. This is similar to what Dima Adamsky describes as "informational deterrence." It means issuing a threat of damage at the non-kinetic warfare level – in our case, information warfare – if the target country of the interference effort does not comply with Russian demands.¹²⁰ The campaign can be seen as a "gun placed on the table" and poses a threat that, at a later point, the interference campaign will be used aggressively when relevant decision points or elections take place.
- B. Doppelganger-Israel fulfills Russia's current needs.** Israel is no longer central to Russian interests and there is no urgency on Moscow's part for a more extensive campaign. Low efficiency is probably a general feature of the Doppelganger campaign in the short term and Israel is not an exception. Official Israeli protests and publications of research and media reports may serve as evidence that "the pressure on Israel is working." This hypothesis illustrates that any official protest about Doppelganger should be weighed carefully and protest should be delivered only when it is clear that the benefits outweigh the risks.
- C. Doppelganger is a part of Russia's larger information operations in Israel.** While investigative reports about Doppelganger find that it occasionally promotes messages and "products" through other Russian disinformation actors. The success of the Russian interference campaign must be measured over time and take a broad look at all Russian activity in Israel, not just a single interference campaign. It can be argued that keeping Israel in a state in which it "swings" between Russia and the West

concerning security assistance to Ukraine and exercises relative caution in its relations with Moscow may be perceived by the Kremlin as a successful utilization of the entire Russian toolbox vis-à-vis the Israeli government.

- D. A Russian global effort to project power.** Russian information warfare through interference campaigns, cyber, intelligence activities, and diplomacy is helping Russia maintain, in a cost-effective manner, its image as a superpower at a time when it is embroiled in a war in Ukraine and a crisis with the West. So, the more Russia engages in active interference campaigns worldwide, and the more media and government agencies engage with Russian interference, the stronger the image of global Russian power.
- E. Bureaucratic dynamics:** Doppelganger is a vehicle for government grants for the SDA and its colleagues, and they present it internally as a success story worth replicating. Thomas Rid, a leading scholar of Russian and Soviet information warfare, is convinced, that the Kremlin is the main target audience of Doppelganger and that all of SDA activity is built around fooling the PA into believing that the campaign has a serious impact. In his opinion, many more people read about Doppelganger messages from the press than from the campaign's dissemination channels. Rid warns the disinformation researchers against exaggerating the significance of foreign interference actors and thus helping them to secure funding from their customers.¹²¹

The relatively limited scope of Doppelganger's activity in Israel might change rapidly based on the campaign operators' assessment of the situation and the Doppelganger campaign can also be integrated with other tools. Israel is a relatively convenient country for Russia in terms of its ability to operate a variety of Russian information warfare tools, including those outside the digital sphere. Russian representatives in Israel can stage provocations and combine them with media activity in light of a large number of Russian speakers, a large number of flights to Russia, and the absence of published restrictions on the activity of intelligence agents. The latter enjoy diplomatic immunity in Israel, unlike in Western countries, where there have been large-scale expulsions of Russian spies disguised as diplomats over the past five years.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report focused only on one global disinformation campaign by Russia, out of dozens being run simultaneously.¹²² This example is insightful, and unprecedented, due to the abundance of internal materials available. This wealth of materials allows us to study the campaign from the highest political echelon in the Kremlin, down to tactical interactions in social media. This in-depth test case helps to understand the strengths and weaknesses of Russian information warfare, as well as the limitations and opportunities for Western countermeasures.

From the Israeli perspective, the Doppelganger campaign is another element in the complex web of relations between Moscow and Jerusalem, as the space for shared interests is rapidly shrinking, and as Russia is betting on coercive tools to further its interests. The Doppelganger affair and Russia's conduct during the "Swords of Iron" war indicate that in Russian eyes Israel is no longer considered a "friendly country" – even if it is not yet on Russia's list of "unfriendly" countries (a formal status, which entails restrictions and sanctions).¹²³

Moreover, the Russian interference campaign plays a role in eroding Holocaust memory and fueling antisemitism globally. This is an important moral issue, recognized by a broad international audience – including decision-makers – as a pillar of Israel's global legitimacy.

Moscow probably believes that there is nothing unusual in the interference in Israel and that it is merely reacting to Israel's distancing itself from it (Russia has reacted in a similar fashion toward other Western countries). Moreover, it is not certain that Russia has a cohesive top-down policy toward Israel. Doppelganger's interference campaign in Hebrew may have been initiated by Kiriyenko's team and continued undisturbed for more than a year, as Moscow did not face significant repercussions in its relations with Jerusalem.

The Israeli defense establishment has noted Doppelganger's activities, yet Moscow has not been deterred from continuing its interference. Western countries and technology companies are also struggling to deter Russia and halt further interference campaigns.

This study suggests that the limited scale and efficiency of the Doppelganger operations in Israel could, ostensibly, be explained by several options:

- The campaign (along with other tools at Russia's disposal) meets Moscow's satisfaction in line with the goals it has set for itself: Israel continues to deny Ukraine lethal weapons, publicly confronts the Biden administration, and maintains a substantive dialogue with Russia. It also serves Russia's global power image.
- The campaign does not currently resonate greatly in Israel but serves Moscow by demonstrating its ability to operate in the Israeli domestic arena. Given a pressing need, the Russians will be able to expand the campaign.
- The campaign may have failed entirely, serving only the Russian contractors who have managed to extract funds from the Russian government and gain its favor and appreciation.

Option C, even if correct, cannot serve as a reference point for the Israeli government. Israel's domestic polarization exposes the country to foreign interference. This vulnerability existed before the "Swords of Iron" war but has intensified since. Now, not only Russia but also Iran,¹²⁴ China,¹²⁵ and radical Islamist elements¹²⁶ are actively working to exploit divisions within Israeli society. Their efforts are unlikely to be coordinated, but their cumulative activities can still produce negative synergies.

The "Swords of Iron" war has prompted a public and governmental debate in Israel how to reassess national security threats and how to allocate resources accordingly. However, the threat of foreign interference is not considered important and is overshadowed by other "more challenging" and urgent issues. Yet, the messages threaten the foundations of Israel's democracy and its partnership with the United States.

Although the current impact of the Russian interference campaign in Israel may be limited, experience from other countries that have faced similar Russian operations demonstrates that such campaigns undermine internal stability and erode social cohesion and trust in institutions. This has been evident across nearly all European countries affected by Russian interference. In the United States, in 2016, the Trump administration faced scrutiny, being suspected of being elected with the help of Russian interference. Furthermore, the integration of AI-based tools in political interference campaigns is expected to intensify.¹²⁷

Western countries invest significantly more effort than Israel in addressing interference operations. They have established institutions designed to counter these efforts and engage in tackling the threat. A former senior Ukrainian defense official asserted that the greatest threat to Ukraine from Russia was not military but rather information warfare.¹²⁸ In the

U.S., the Republican chairs of the House Intelligence Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee stated in April 2024 that Russian interference campaigns profoundly impact their party and major media outlets.¹²⁹ Additionally, Viginum, the French watchdog that monitors and protects against foreign digital interference and which works under the French prime minister's office, reported in July 2023 that Doppelganger's interference campaign "threatens the fundamental interests of the French nation."¹³⁰

The Doppelganger test case emphasizes the ability of civil society to play a significant role in exposing the technical infrastructure of foreign interference actors. It also shows the importance of U.S. proactivity, and behind the scenes international cooperation on this issue. . It was only after the U.S. Federal Government weighed in against Doppelganger before the elections that the Russian campaign suffered significant technical difficulties.

In contrast, Israel lacks a national strategy and relevant legislation to counter foreign interference. The Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), which is responsible for handling such matters, has not been provided with a comprehensive set of regulatory tools. Additionally, the government's collaboration with civil society organizations on this issue is still in its infancy.¹³¹

This article is not meant to incite alarmism¹³² but to advocate for a serious and thoughtful approach to this crucial issue. Moscow's interference in Israel's internal affairs should be given greater consideration in the continuous assessment of Israel's relations with Russia. There is no need for immediate public announcements of Israeli measures against Moscow, as this could send the Russians a signal that their interference campaign is having an effect. However, it is essential for the Israeli government to gain clarity on Russia's hostile role and to counter and, ideally, stop such interference.

The SDA's intent to leverage its campaign in Israel's next elections, underscores the urgent need to develop an invigorated national response to foreign – particularly Russian – interference.

In this context, Israel should:

- Establish a national body designed to coordinate inter-agency efforts against foreign interference, address legislative gaps, and provide government institutions with the necessary enforcement powers. This governmental body should enhance cooperation with civil society and technology companies, as well as promote public education on critical information consumption.

- Work more closely with Western partners to dismantle the Doppelganger campaign and collaborate on holding Russia accountable for its interference operations. The mid-2024 successful countermeasures against the Russian campaign by the U.S. DOJ, technology companies and NGOs underscore the importance of joint action aimed at degrading the technological infrastructure of campaign operators.
- Refresh its toolkit so that it can impose costs on Moscow for its interference. Israel remains one of the few Western countries that still grants Russian representatives and citizens significant freedom of action, which is well appreciated by Russia.
- Formulate a strategy for discreet communications with the Russians on the external interference problem. Issuing warnings without imposing costs may be perceived in Moscow as feedback that the cognitive campaign is "painful" for Israeli decision-makers and may portray Israel as weak. If Israel issues a warning to Russia, it is important to make sure that the benefit derived from the protest/warning outweighs the potential damage if Russia disregards the warning.

NOTES

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