



DisinfoDigest

# CANADIAN VULNERABILITY TO RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ABOUT UKRAINE

8 July 2024

In Spring 2024, DisinfoWatch and Canadian Digital Media Research Network conducted a survey of 2,127 Canadians to assess their exposure to several leading Kremlin narratives about Russia's war against Ukraine and to understand the vulnerability of Canadians to these narratives. We found that:

- **Most Canadians have been exposed to Russian FIMI narratives, with 71% of Canadians having heard at least one of the narratives, with an average exposure of 2.1 narratives.**
- **A substantial portion of Canadians exposed to Kremlin narratives believe them to be true or are unsure of their falsehood** . For example, 70% of those exposed to the narrative about financial aid being misappropriated either believe it or are unsure.
- We found a **marked difference in susceptibility to Russian disinformation along political lines**. Conservative supporters, who report the highest exposure levels to Kremlin narratives, are also more likely to believe in them compared to their Liberal and NDP counterparts. For instance, only 55% of Conservatives exposed to the "Ukrainian Nazis" narrative believe it is false, compared to a higher rejection rate among other political groups.

## Overview

Since Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin has steadily intensified its information warfare targeting Ukraine, NATO and the Western democratic world, both inside and outside of Russia using foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

## LATEST

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## LATEST EXAMPLES

Over the past decade, the primary objectives of Russian FIMI and influence operations are to:

- Erode public support for Ukraine and NATO;
- Undermine unity among NATO allies;
- Discredit and intimidate governments, communities, journalists and activists that are critical of the Kremlin;
- Exploit existing divisions within democratic societies in order to undermine social cohesion and trust in our governments, media and civil society.

The Kremlin narratives that we tested are those that regularly feature on Russian state controlled media platforms like RT, Sputnik and in statements by the Russian government, officials and diplomats.

#### **They include:**

- “Financial aid sent to Ukraine is being pocketed by corrupt officials within the Ukrainian government.”
- “Weapons we send to help Ukraine defend itself are just being sold on the black market instead.”
- “Ukraine and NATO are the ones who started the war with Russia.”
- “Russia is at war because it is trying to defend itself from Ukrainian Nazis.”:
- “Russia is going to win eventually, so sending aid to Ukraine is only delaying the inevitable.”
- “Ukraine should give up their eastern territory for peace since the people living there are Russian anyway.”

Research has demonstrated that these narratives are amplified inside western societies, including Canada, by regime aligned influencers, who may or may not receive benefit from doing so, targeting audiences on both ends of the political spectrum. The reach of these influencers on social media is not limited by borders. Canadian audiences are exposed to content posted by influencers in Canada, the US and beyond.

Polling of Americans who identify as conservatives, has demonstrated a likely vulnerability to Russian government narratives which may correlate with a dramatic decrease in support for Ukraine among right leaning Republicans voters.

A May 2024 Pew Research report about US public support for Ukraine found a growing partisan gap between Republican and Democrat voters over the course of the war. Polling during the first months of the war found that just 9% of Republican voters believed that the United States was providing too much aid to Ukraine. That number increased to 49% in April 2024. In the same timeframe, Democrats who believed that the US is giving too much aid to Ukraine increased from 7% to 31%. The same Pew report also found that 55% of Republicans lacked confidence in President Zelenskyy, in contrast to 65% of Democrats who said they are confident in Ukraine’s president.

Similar trends have been observed in Canada. A February 2024 Angus Reid poll found that the number of Conservative voters who believed that Canada is giving too much to Ukraine doubled from 19% in May 2022 to 43%.

While multiple domestic and geopolitical factors may have influenced these results, the impact of Russian information and influence operations on public opinion should also be considered.

Our analysis aims to assess Canadian public vulnerabilities to each of the key Russian FIMI narratives above, across the Canadian political spectrum.

#### **Who is Exposed?**

In March 2024, the Media Ecosystem Observatory, on behalf of the Canadian Digital Media Research Network, surveyed a nationally representative sample of Canadians (n = 2,127)

[Pro-Kremlin Twitter/X Account Falsely Claims Foreign Mercenaries in Kursk](#)

[RT Published Baseless Allegations of War Crimes in Kursk](#)

[Ukraine Is Not “Banning Christianity”](#)

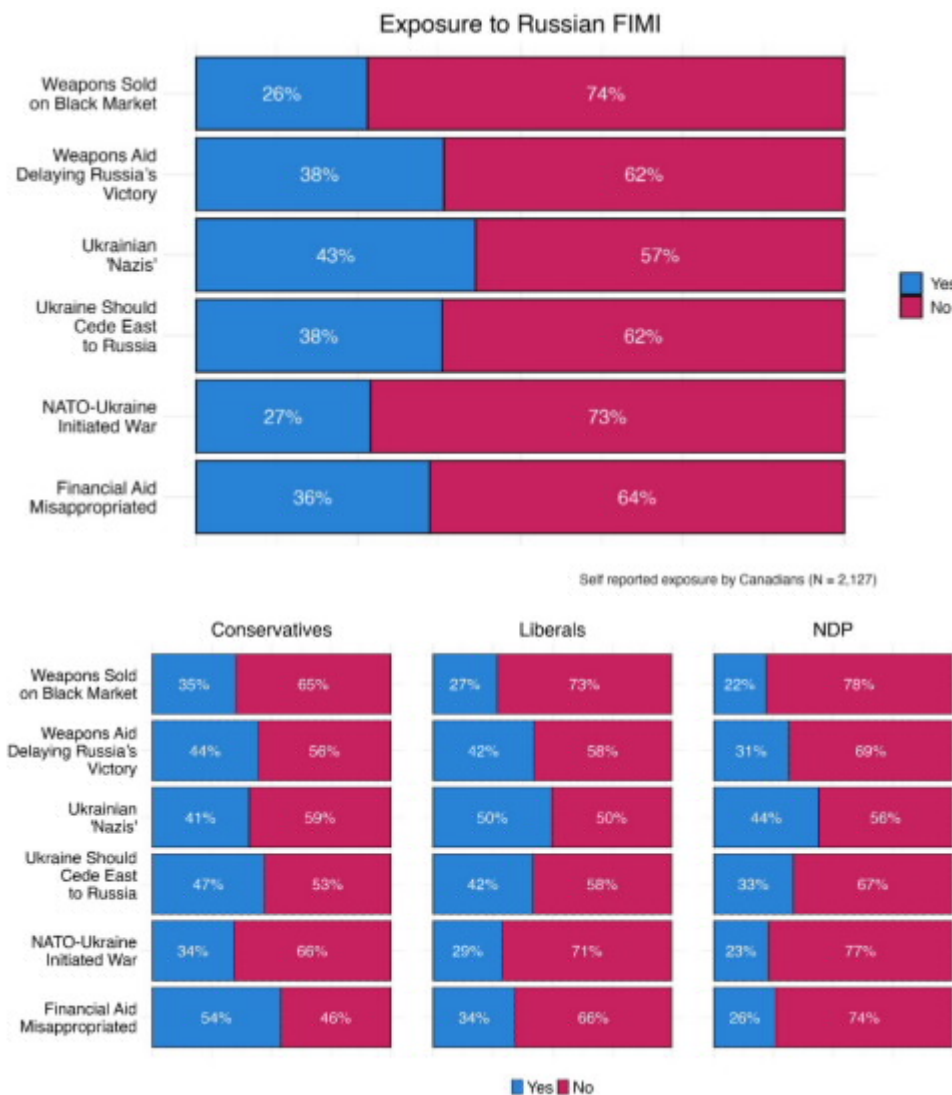
[Kremlin Claims About Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant](#)

[Russian MFA Falsely Claims Ukraine Spreading “Terror”](#)

about their exposure to six leading Kremlin Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) narratives regarding Russia’s war against Ukraine. If respondents had heard of these narratives, they were asked if they believed them to be true or not.

Nearly half of those surveyed had heard the Kremlin’s false claim that “Russia is at war because it is trying to defend itself from Ukrainian Nazis,” while only 26% of Canadians had heard the Russian narrative that falsely claims, “Weapons we send to help Ukraine defend itself are just being sold on the black market instead.”

A disproportionately high number of Canadians who identified as Conservative Party voters (54%) reported being exposed to the Kremlin narrative that falsely claims, “Financial aid sent to Ukraine is being pocketed by corrupt officials within the Ukrainian government.” Out of the six Kremlin FIMI narratives tested, Conservative Party voters reported the most exposure to five of them.



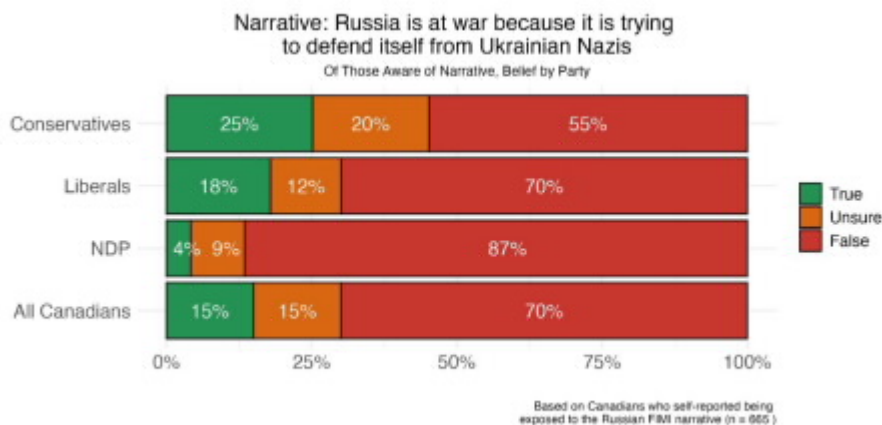
### “Russia is defending itself from Ukrainian Nazis”

The Kremlin has regularly accused Ukraine’s government and people – as well as the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian governments and people – of being neo-Nazis to justify its invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and its latest full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin claimed in February 2022, that he had ordered Russian forces to invade Ukraine to “de-Nazify” the country. Ukraine’s president is Jewish and unlike Russia and many European nations, not a single far-right party holds a seat in Ukraine’s parliament.

False claims about the presence of neo-Nazis in Ukraine have been repeated by Kremlin aligned influencers in the democratic world, including Canada. For example, populist US Congresswoman and conspiracy theorist, Marjorie Taylor Greene has amplified this narrative to her millions of followers on social media.

This narrative has been identified by both Erik Møse, Chair of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine and leading human rights legal scholar, Yonah Diamond as an incitement to hate.

70% of Canadians exposed to the narrative believe that it is either definitely or probably false. However significantly fewer Canadians exposed to the narrative who identify as Conservatives believe this narrative is false, with just 55% rejecting this false Kremlin narrative.

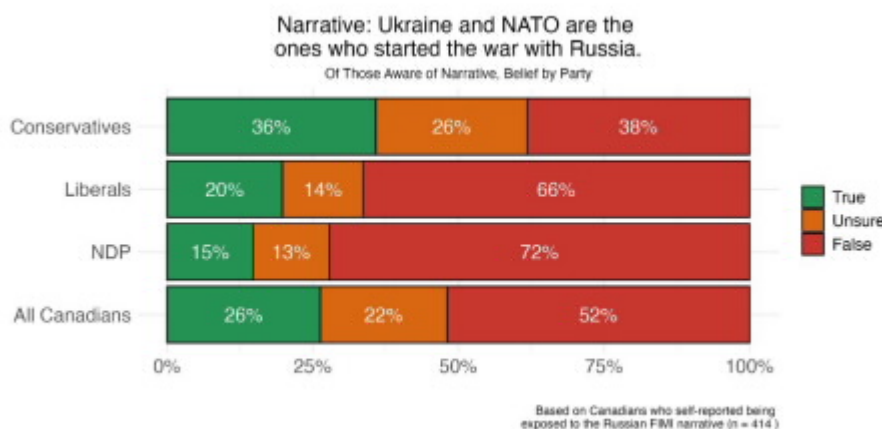


**Narrative: “Ukraine and NATO are the ones who started the war with Russia.”**

The Kremlin and its allies have regularly blamed Ukraine and NATO for starting the war with Russia., This narrative is a central component of the Kremlin’s information war against Russians, the Western world and Ukraine.

By portraying Ukraine as a “puppet” of NATO and alleging Western responsibility for the war, Russia seeks to frame its invasion as a defensive measure rather than an act of aggression. This narrative aims to legitimize Russia’s actions on the international stage and deflect blame. It also exploits existing anti-Western sentiments and skepticism about NATO’s role as a defensive alliance in Canada and other western societies. This narrative also aims to fracture alliance cohesion and unity.

Inside of Russia, this narrative is deployed to bolster domestic support for the war by fostering a sense of external threat and nationalistic fervor. State-controlled media in Russia amplifies these themes, portraying the conflict as a struggle against Western encroachment and the defense of Russian-speaking populations.



**Narrative: “Financial aid sent to Ukraine is being pocketed by corrupt officials within the Ukrainian government”**

False narratives about western support for Ukraine being misappropriated by Ukraine officials are deployed by the Kremlin to undermine support for Ukraine and weaken Western resolve.

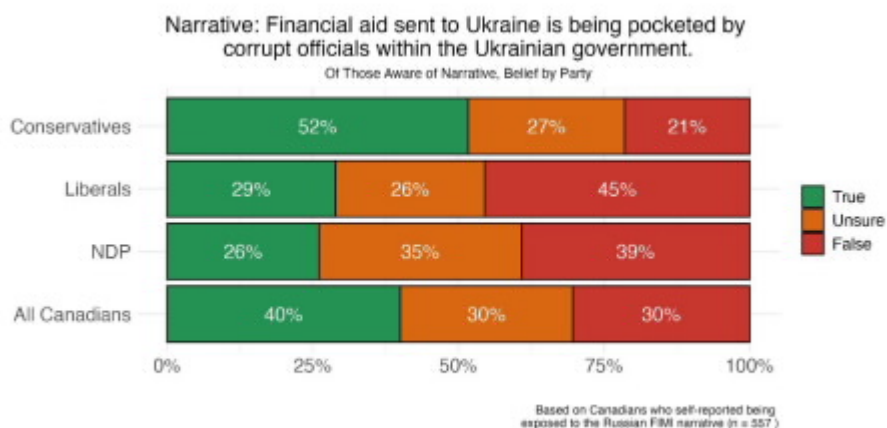
Both international and domestic audiences are targeted by this narrative.

Internationally, the Kremlin seeks to erode trust and unity among countries providing aid to Ukraine. By casting doubt on the integrity of the Ukrainian government, Russia hopes to undermine the willingness of these countries to continue their financial and military support. It is intended to foster skepticism and hesitation among Western voters and policymakers, potentially leading to a reduction in aid. It exploits existing concerns about corruption in Ukraine, amplifying these worries to create a perception that assistance is futile and misused.

Domestically, the narrative serves to justify Russia's actions and distract from its own endemic corruption. By portraying Ukraine as inherently corrupt, the Kremlin shifts the focus away from its own governance problems and frames the conflict as a moral crusade against a corrupt neighbor. This serves to consolidate support among Russians by reinforcing negative stereotypes about Ukraine and justifying the invasion as a necessary intervention.

Ultimately, the Kremlin's goal is to weaken Ukraine's position by reducing international support, thereby making it more vulnerable and easier to influence or control.

70% of Canadians exposed to this narrative either believe or are unsure if this narrative is false – indicating a significant failure to raise awareness of the facts about this issue. Over half of Conservative supporters believe this narrative to be true, compared to 29% of Liberal voters. Among the various Russian narratives included in this poll, this particular narrative was the second most believed among Conservative supporters.



**Narrative: “Weapons we send to help Ukraine defend itself are just being sold on the black market instead.”**

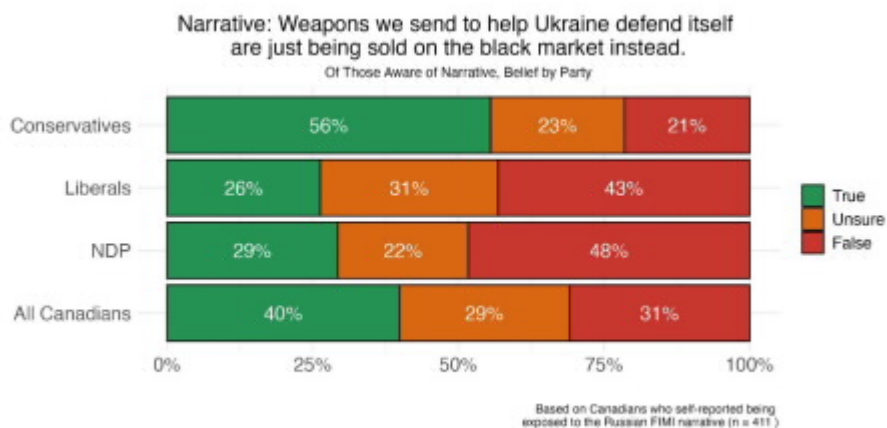
According to the BBC, the Kremlin has created fake listings for the sale of Western weapons on dark web sites to give the false impression that Western weapons being donated to Ukraine are being sold off on the black market by corrupt members of Ukraine's military. There is no evidence of this. This narrative targets both international and domestic audiences, aiming to provoke doubt and reduce public support for Ukraine.

Internationally, the Kremlin seeks to erode trust and solidarity among nations that are providing military assistance to Ukraine. By falsely claiming that weapons that are donated to Ukraine are being misused and sold illegally, Russia hopes to foster skepticism and hesitation among Western policymakers and citizens. This narrative exploits existing concerns about accountability and the potential for the proliferation of arms and it aims to decrease the willingness of these countries to continue their support.

Domestically, this narrative serves to reinforce other regime narratives that portray Ukraine as irresponsible and corrupt. It also serves to shift focus away from the Kremlin's own aggression and frames the conflict as a necessary intervention to prevent chaos and instability.

A majority of Conservative supporters who had been exposed to this narrative believe it is true. Among the narratives we polled, Canadians were most unsure of this one, with 69% of

Canadians either believing or unsure of whether this is a false narrative, demonstrating the need to raise awareness about its false nature.



**Narrative: “Ukraine should give up its eastern territories for peace since the people living there are Russian anyway”**

The Kremlin has falsely claimed that its occupation of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine are justified because Russia has a rightful claim to them. This is done through the manipulation of history, and the use of false narratives about Ukrainian persecution of Russian speakers. This narrative targets international audiences, including Western policymakers and the general public, as well as domestic audiences within Russia and the disputed territories.

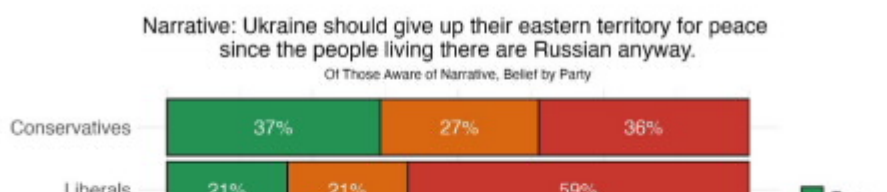
Internationally, the narrative aims to create a perception that the conflict is a local, ethnic dispute rather than an aggressive invasion by Russia. By framing the issue as one of self-determination for Russian-speaking populations, The Kremlin justifies its invasion as a mission to protect and save Russian compatriots and justifies its occupation of these territories. This narrative attempts to garner sympathy and support from those who view ethnic self-determination as a legitimate reason for redrawing borders. The Kremlin deploys this narrative to reduce international support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity with the hope that western nations will force Ukraine to cede territory occupied by Russia.

Domestically, this is a leading regime narrative that is deployed to justify Russia’s military actions and bolster nationalist sentiment and incite hate towards Ukrainians. By portraying the conflict as a defense of ethnic Russians, the Kremlin aims to consolidate internal support and distract from economic and political issues within Russia.

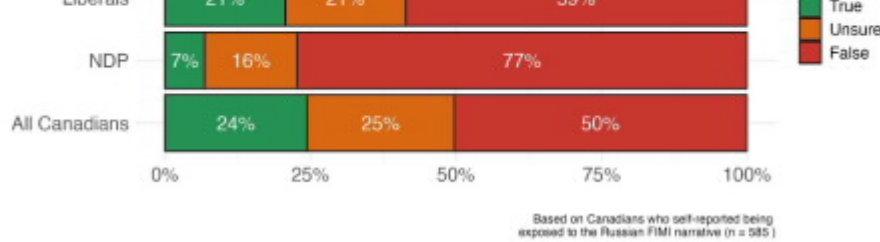
To support this narrative, the Kremlin manipulates history by invoking historical ties and previous governance of these territories under Russian or Soviet rule. It also disseminates disinformation about supposed widespread support for Russian annexation among the local population. This includes fabricating stories of oppression and violence against Russian speakers in Ukraine to justify intervention and territorial claims.

Ultimately, the Kremlin’s goal is to weaken Ukraine, create a precedent for altering borders based on ethnic lines, and recolonize territories that achieved independence after the collapse of the Soviet era Russia.

Half of Canadians exposed to the narrative believe it is probably false – led by 77% of NDP supporters. 37% of Conservatives believe this narrative is true versus 21% of Liberal supporters polled.







**Narrative: “Russia is going to win eventually, so sending aid to Ukraine is only delaying the inevitable”**

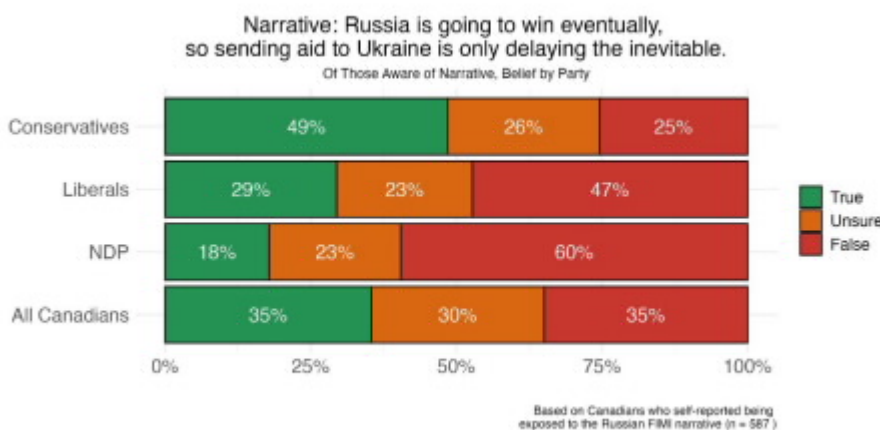
Narratives that promote the inevitability of Russia’s victory and Ukraine’s defeat are intended to erode Western resolve and demoralize Ukrainians with the goal of forcing Ukraine to negotiate the ceding of territories invaded by Russia. The Kremlin also deploys this narrative to give the impression that by sending aid to Ukraine, the West is responsible for prolonging the suffering of Ukrainians and that it is only delaying Russia’s inevitable victory. This narrative targets primarily international audiences and Western policymakers.

Internationally, the Kremlin aims create a sense of futility around Western aid and intervention. This narrative attempts to persuade policymakers and citizens in supporting countries that their efforts are in vain, thereby reducing the flow of financial, military, and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. If successful, this could lead to the deterioration of Ukraine’s defense and resilience, making it more vulnerable to Russia’s ongoing advances.

Inside Russia, the narrative serves to reinforce confidence in the Kremlin’s leadership and military strategy. By asserting the inevitability of victory, the Kremlin aims to maintain public support and morale and to counter war-weariness. It also helps to justify the hardships faced by the Russian population, the exploitation of economically vulnerable minority groups who are conscripted to fight Russia’s war, presenting them as necessary towards Russia’s victory.

This narrative is bolstered by disinformation campaigns and selective reporting that exaggerate Russian military successes while downplaying setbacks.

Nearly half of Conservative supporters polled believe the narrative that Russia’s victory is inevitable.



**Conclusion: Concern About Canadian Susceptibility to Russian Information Operations about Ukraine**

Most Canadians have heard at least one Russian narrative, and many of those who have heard of them, believe they are true or are unsure of their veracity. This indicates that substantial work is still required to educate and raise awareness among Canadians to help them discern false Russian narratives. It also suggests that Canadians are susceptible to Russian information operations.

Our survey results reveal a concerning vulnerability among certain political groups in Canada. Conservative supporters, in particular, show a higher susceptibility to being unsure about or believing Russian narratives compared to their Liberal and NDP counterparts. This

polarization mirrors trends observed in the United States and suggests that Russian disinformation exploits existing political divides to achieve its objectives.

Raising awareness and educating the public about these disinformation tactics is crucial. The findings underline the urgent need for the development and widespread implementation of robust media literacy programs across Canada. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations must take proactive measures to counteract foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). Strengthening Canadian resilience against such influence operations is essential to maintaining sovereignty over our information environment.

In conclusion, Kremlin information and influence operations continue to pose a significant threat to Western democracies, including Canada. Addressing this challenge requires a concerted and comprehensive effort across society to enhance public understanding of disinformation and bolster our defenses against these malign influences.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Enhance Media Literacy Programs:**

Learn from allies and rapidly develop and implement comprehensive media literacy programs in schools and communities to educate citizens on identifying and critically evaluating disinformation.

### **Strengthen Public Awareness Campaigns:**

Enhance civil society efforts to inform Canadians about the specific tactics and goals of Russian disinformation, emphasizing the importance of verifying information from multiple credible sources.

### **Government, Civil Society, Media, Social Media Cooperation:**

Foster collaboration between government agencies, civil society, media and social media to create a unified front against disinformation. Share best practices and coordinate efforts to counteract foreign authoritarian influence operations including pre-bunking and de-bunking.

### **Support Quality Journalism**

Provide funding and resources to independent journalism initiatives that aim to counter disinformation with factual reporting. Encourage and support journalism that exposes facts and truth about Ukraine and its war, and journalists who expose and challenge Russia's false narratives.

### **Social Media Regulation:**

Following Europe's Digital Services Act, Canada should consider imposing strict regulations to improve the responsiveness of social media platforms to identify, react to and remove foreign disinformation and related narratives quickly. Platforms should be required to be transparent about their algorithms and moderation practices.

### **Political Leadership and Accountability:**

Encourage political leaders to speak out against foreign disinformation and expose those who amplify FIMI. Make annual disinformation and influence operations awareness courses mandatory for all Canadian elected officials and their staff.

### **International Cooperation:**

Work with international partners to share intelligence and strategies for combating disinformation and share with Canadian civil society, media and elected officials. Strengthen alliances to ensure a coordinated and robust response to Russian information warfare.

## Research and Monitoring:

Continue to invest in research to continuously monitor and analyze the spread and impact of disinformation.

### About the Authors:



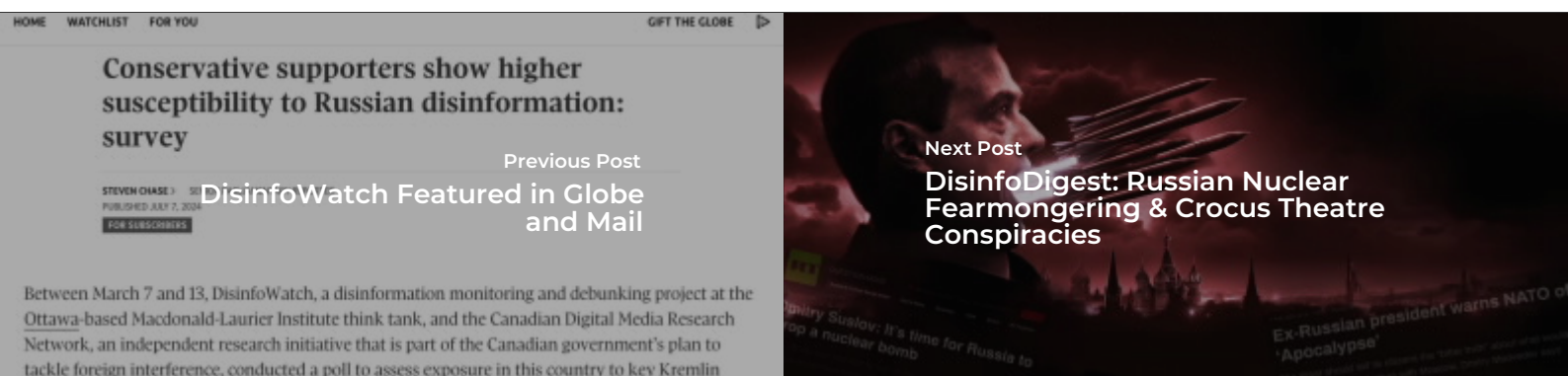
#### Marcus Kolga

Marcus is the founder of DisinfoWatch and is a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier and CDA Institutes and The Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights.



#### Christopher Ross

Christopher is a survey analyst for the Canadian Digital Media Research Network. He has a MA in Political Science from McGill University.




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