

Russian interference in the Catalan independence crisis (2014-2022)

David E. Alandete

Foreword by
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Contents

FOREWORD

Javier Zarzalejos Nieto	5
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PART 1: DISINFORMATION

Russian disinformation about Catalonia: link with Ukraine	11
Project Lakhta: the great Russian interference campaign in the EU and the USA	21
Disinformation about the Catalan independence crisis	37

PART 2: ESPIONAGE AND CONSPIRACY

Putin compares the Catalonia crisis to Ukraine	55
Russian military spies in Barcelona during the 2017 referendum	59
Meetings between Catalan leaders and Russian emissaries in Barcelona, 2017	65
Second round of contacts. Protests in Catalonia and energy deals ...	77
Response from the Spanish government	87
Measures by the European authorities	95

Foreword

OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, THE EUROPEAN UNION HAS REALISED THE ENORMOUS CHALLENGE that foreign interference and disinformation campaigns deployed from abroad represent for democracy. The institutions have developed measures to fight against this type of strategies that seek to undermine the basic pillars on which our democratic system is built and sustained.

The European Parliament has established during the current legislature the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) to define an approach that addresses evidence of foreign interference in the European Union and its Member States.

More broadly, this committee not only aims to protect the values of the European Union, but democracy itself. The quality of our democracies leans on citizens making informed decisions, which makes the fight against disinformation and foreign interferences a priority.

The European Parliament's plenary adopted on 9 March 2022 a first report on this issue analysing the situation in the European Union and setting out concrete recommendations to combat

such actions. The report notes that Russia, China and other authoritarian regimes, such as Iran and Venezuela, have funnelled “more than 259 million euros into 33 countries to interfere in democratic processes, and this trend is clearly accelerating”.

Russia is singled out as being responsible for major interference and disinformation campaigns on European soil. There is evidence of Russian interference in European democracies, such as the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the secessionist process in Catalonia, the 2017 presidential elections in France, as well as practical support for extremist, populist and anti-European parties across Europe, particularly in France, Germany, Italy and Austria. Russia’s goal in all these cases has always been the same: to promote internal destabilisation and disunity in the European Union.

This book aims to serve as a case study of one of the campaigns mentioned in the European Parliament’s report. The report states that “findings about the close regular contacts between Russian officials and representatives of a group of Catalan secessionists in Spain require an in-depth investigation, and are part of Russia’s wider strategy to use each and every opportunity to manipulate discourse in order to promote destabilisation”.

To counter such Russian interferences, institutions and citizens must have a common understanding of the threat faced. To understand and counter it, there is a need to increase the collective situational awareness. We need to know and understand the tools used by malign foreign actors, and who -or what- they are targeting in their destabilisation attempts.

The conclusions of the book you have in hands highlight the seriousness of the events occurred in Catalonia during this period. Moreover, this investigation emphasises the destabilizing purpose

of Russia, attacking the constitutional stability of a Member State and the collusion of the Catalan pro-independence parties. The Kremlin assumed the fact that supporting secessionism is a useful tool in its strategy to promote destabilisation and disunity in the European Union.

With this excellent investigation, David Alandete, a Spanish journalist of international renown in the field of disinformation, lays bare the truth surrounding this case. The author rigorously and accurately structures the study in two parts. Firstly, he analyses the Russian disinformation campaigns on Catalonia. Secondly, he goes over the espionage and conspiracy plot involving Russian emissaries and pro-independence leaders in Catalonia.

The investigation confirms that the massive disinformation that Russia has applied in Catalonia is real, as well as the efforts of Russian media to virilise content, and the close relationship between the agents responsible for Russian interference and the pro-independence movement. Even if it could seem the plot of a spy movie, it is a reality happening on European soil. Looking ahead, knowing in depth how Russia acted in this particular case should help the European Union to be prepared to deal with such threats.

Today we are witnessing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where terrible consequences are flowing. This war has been paved by disinformation and interference, as the Kremlin has developed an aggressive disinformation strategy and influence around Russian military aggression.

We cannot tolerate the extension of Russian influence. The European Union must become aware of the structural confrontation with Russia as the main threat to our security and take the necessary measures to combat all its forms of hybrid warfare. In this regard, the EPP Group believes that the European Union must

strengthen its own capabilities to detect, expose and fight disinformation and foreign interference strategies.

This book is a small but meaningful contribution to the fight against these practices. Knowing what has happened will help us to prevent future attacks by those who seek to destabilise and disunite the European Union. In conclusion, this well-founded study serves, as an ultimate goal, to protect the principles and values on which our democracies are established.

Javier Zarzalejos

Member of the European Parliament

Part 1

DISINFORMATION

Russian disinformation about Catalonia: link with Ukraine

ACCORDING TO THE CONCLUSIONS DRAWN BY EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES, the Russian government has been involved in a campaign of hybrid warfare since at least 2014, consisting of interference in the political life of its main adversaries in Europe and North America. This is a varied strategy including disinformation campaigns — publishing and disseminating manipulated news to exacerbate political crises — cyber attacks, spying missions and traditional sabotage and, as the US State Department revealed in September 2022, funding like-minded parties in the West to buy their loyalty.

Spain, a member state of the European Union and NATO, has been a victim of this strategy, as will be seen below. According to witnesses and reports quoted in this section, Russia has been undertaking a disinformation campaign to promote independence in Catalonia since at least 2014. At the same time, as will be seen in the following section, a number of Catalan leaders and their aides have maintained

contact with Russia in support of this disinformation campaign with the aim of gaining Russia's support for an independent Catalonia.

Congresses of pro-independence parties in Moscow, 2014-2016. Catalan participation.

Russia's disinformation campaign in Catalonia includes a significant link with the conflict in Ukraine, the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the 2022 invasion which has gained particular importance following discoveries made by the judicial police and the United States Justice Department in July of the same year. As the US Justice Department revealed, the Kremlin has encouraged political separatism in Europe and the US to create internal divisions there, and has spent years seeking support for its strategy of annexing Ukraine, in whole or in part.

Various reports from legislative, diplomatic and judicial bodies in the US, a country that has committed substantial resources to investigating Russian interference following the 2016 presidential elections, identify Spain as a target of these campaigns due to its role as a member of the EU and a NATO partner with two military bases, used jointly with the US.

The US Justice Department's indictment in July 2022 of Alexander Ionov, a prominent organiser of pro-independence congresses who works in conjunction with the FSB (Federal Security Service), the Russian espionage service, analysed below, specifically names Spain as a target of these campaigns:

Working under FSB supervision and with FSB support, [Alexander] Ionov recruited members of various political groups within the United States and other countries, including Ukraine, **Spain**¹, the United King-

¹ The bold emphasis is the author's.

dom, and Ireland, to attend conferences in Russia. These conferences were sponsored by the Anti-Globalization Movement of Russia and funded by the Russian government. The purpose of the conferences was to encourage the participating groups to advocate for separating from their home countries².

Between 2014 and 2016, pro-independence party congresses were held at Moscow hotels which, according to the FBI, formed part of campaigns of interference directed by Russian intelligence, with digitally disseminated disinformation in many cases. At least two of these congresses were attended by Catalans, specifically from a pro-independence party called Solidaritat Catalana per la Independència. This is a small, marginal party, but its presence in Moscow provided enough material to generate several fake news stories, the starting point of the disinformation campaign, as will be seen below.

Ionov, the indicted individual, is a lawyer who has been working since at least 2013 for the FSB, which is under the immediate jurisdiction of the Russian president. Extensive information was published about his activity³ following these pro-independence congresses, but his direct connections with the FSB were not confirmed until he was indicted by the Justice Department, as indicated above, and sanctions were imposed on him by the US Treasury, also in July 2022.

The last of the pro-independence congresses in Moscow, called ‘The dialogue of nations: the right to self-determination and the construction of a multipolar world’, held at the Ritz Carlton hotel in Moscow in 2016, gave rise to one of the most notable pub-

² Grand Jury Indictment of Alexander Ionov, Tampa, Case 8:22-cr-00259-WFJ-AEP. 26/7/2022. Link: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1523096/download>

³ ‘La conexión moscovita del “procés” con los hackers rusos’, Xavier Colas, El Mundo. 4/10/2017. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elmundo.es/cronica/2017/10/04/59cfd94ae5fdea54288b45d2.html>

lications in the Russian campaign of interference in the Catalan crisis, a fake news story with the headline ‘An independent Catalonia will recognise that Crimea is Russian’⁴, with a link to the Ukrainian conflict.

Some 30 pro-independence politicians and activists from all over the world, not including Russia (where support for independence carries a jail sentence), gathered in Moscow invited by Ionov, who was acting in coordination with Russian intelligence. The ultimate goal, which was not achieved, was to create a working committee to coordinate the action of separatist groups on every continent, under Russian supervision.

Ionov, the organiser, is the president of the so-called Anti-Globalisation Movement of Russia, which, according to the US Justice Department’s findings, revealed in 2022, is an instrument utilised to ‘carry out Russia’s influence campaigns’. He obtained funds from the Russian government for the congress in 2016, 3.5 million roubles (approximately 45,000 at the exchange rate at the time) through the National Charity Fund, created by President Putin in 1999 to promote patriotic and military projects⁵.

The Catalan guests included José Enric Folch, who at that point was the international secretary of Solidaritat Catalana per la Independència, presented in Moscow as ‘a coalition of six political parties

⁴ ‘Una Catalunya independiente reconocerá que Crimea es rusa’, Spanish version of the original news story broadcast by the Iranian channel Hispan TV, 28/9/2016.

Link in Spanish: <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/espana/299406/cataluna-independiente-reconocer-crimea-rusa>

⁵ ‘What’s behind Russian support for world’s separatist movements?’, Mansur Mirovalev, NBC News. 23/7/2016.

Link: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/what-s-behind-russian-support-world-s-separatist-movements-n614196>

that was formed in 2010 to participate in the parliamentary elections in Catalonia, which aims to achieve the independence of Catalonia, incorporated as a sovereign state within the EU'. The coalition did not achieve a single member of the regional parliament the last time it took part in an election. In the previous ballot, in 2010, it obtained four seats, none of them held by Folch himself. Folch has had ties with Russia since 1991, when he moved to there to advise Spanish and European companies on business deals.

Around a hundred journalists attended the meeting of pro-independence campaigners, including employees of the Kremlin-run state media. Folch told several of them that he would like an independent Catalonia to have good relations with Russia, a country with veto rights on the UN Security Council. 'From Catalonia's point of view, we have had very friendly relations with Russia for a long time, there are many Russians living happily in Catalonia without problems of any kind. We regard the Russians as our friends,' he told me later in an interview in 2018.

Folch was then asked about Crimea, which had just been annexed by Russia from Ukraine. The headline subsequently published in the leading Russian newspaper, *Izvestia*, was: 'An independent Catalonia will recognise that Crimea is Russian'. *Izvestia* quoted Folch saying: 'And why not recognise Crimea? A referendum was held on the peninsula, in which the people chose to join Russia. We have to respect the results of that vote. And although an independent Catalonia will remain in the EU, that won't affect its decisions. The same applies to sanctions against Russia. Punitive economic measures have never helped solve problems'.

Folch now asserts that these words are actually an interpretation made by the journalist, who used a translator and mixed up the wording of his questions with the interviewee's answers.

Immediately after Izvestia, the Russian state media platform Sputnik, formally identified by the US State Department as a dis-information outlet in January 2022, published a note in English: ‘An independent Catalonia will recognise that Crimea is Russian’. Sputnik took an unofficial source, who in theory was expressing something that is merely an opinion, and extracted a categorical headline with ramifications in line with Moscow’s interests: independence movements in Europe and legitimisation of the annexation of Ukrainian territories with an ethnic Russian majority, in preparation for the invasion in 2022.

Over the following days, in 2016, newspapers of all kinds in the same sphere of influence also published the information, in various languages, as did the Iranian Spanish-language channel Hispan TV. The headline, shared on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, led to tens of thousands of interactions in various languages. When Folch saw what Sputnik had posted, he called the event organisers and complained about the headline. Shortly afterwards, it was changed to ‘A group says that an independent Catalonia will recognise that Crimea is Russian’, without an erratum notice.

Role of Russian espionage (FSB) in promoting independence in Europe.

As indicated above, Ionov, the promoter of the pro-independence congresses, was indicted and subjected to sanctions by the US in July 2022 for running campaigns to manipulate and destabilise the US and the EU. What the Justice Department found, thanks to US intelligence reports, was that Ionov was working under orders from the FSB with the express objective of using political groups in other countries, in particular the US, as ‘Russian agents’. One of the aims was to support pro-independence political groups.

In September 2022, the US State Department informed approximately 20 embassies that it had found evidence that Russia had financed pro-Russian political groups around the world with at least 400 million dollars since 2014. As will be seen later, in Spain in 2021, the investigating judge Joaquín Aguirre found evidence of money transfers using commission agents engaged in the oil sector in which associates of prominent Catalan leaders may have been involved, but the state prosecution service objected to an investigation into that possible case⁶. Several recent revelations have brought to light that in Italy, for example, Russia used the oil business to attempt to direct money to Matteo Salvini, a candidate aligned with the Kremlin⁷.

The FBI, the judicial police in the US, participated in the investigation into Ionov, which has been under way for several years, and uncovered a complex network of aid and subsidies for separatist groups to promote causes such as the independence of California, Florida or Texas from the rest of the country.

The indictment of Ionov and the sanctions imposed by the US Treasury arise from contacts with groups in the US, after the FBI and Justice Department decided to investigate him. According to the US Justice Department, Ionov organised a global campaign of interference. He ‘directed these groups to publish pro-Russian propaganda, as well as other information designed to ... promote secessionist ideologies’, which was designed to subsequently ‘further Russian inter-

⁶ ‘La Justicia afea al fiscal que no quiera investigar un negocio de petróleo en la trama rusa del proces’, Oriol Solé, *El Diario*, 21/9/2021.

Link in Spanish: https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/justicia-afea-fiscal-no-quiera-investigar-negocio-petroleo-trama-rusa-proces_1_8323028.html

⁷ ‘Italy’s Matteo Salvini is facing calls for an inquiry into a secret Russian oil deal recording revealed by BuzzFeed News’, Alberto Nardelli, *Buzzfeed*, 10/7/2019. Link: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/matteo-salvini-russia-inquiry>

ests; and [he] coordinated coverage of these groups' activities in Russian media outlets', states the indictment⁸.

According to the indictment against Ionov, the fact that he worked for the FSB corresponded to a strategy focused on leveraging crises and divisions in the US and its allies, and promoting the dismemberment and annexation of Ukraine. The document states:

Among the foreign policy objectives of Russian government leadership is to expand Russia's sphere of influence. Russia targets the United States and its allies, as well as other countries, to further that goal. Through these influence operations, Russia attempts to shape foreign perceptions and to influence populations by, among other things, seeking to create wedges that reduce trust and confidence in democratic processes, degrading democratization efforts, weakening U.S. partnerships with European allies, undermining Western sanctions, encouraging anti-U.S. and anti-Western political views, and countering efforts to bring Ukraine and other former Soviet states into European and international institutions.

Ionov has not only organised separatist congresses with the presence of Catalans and money from the Kremlin. He also took on the defence of two Russian hackers who were wanted by the US and who were in fact arrested in Barcelona and subsequently extradited to stand trial.

On 9 January 2017, the Civil Guard at El Prat airport arrested Stanislav Lisov⁹, a computer programmer wanted by the FBI and Interpol for developing a program, known as NeverQuest, to

⁸ Indictment of Alexander Ionov, see above.

⁹ 'Russian hacker who used NeverQuest malware to steal money from victims' bank accounts sentenced in Manhattan federal court to four years in prison', US Department of Justice, press release. 21/11/2019. Link: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/russian-hacker-who-used-neverquest-malware-steal-money-victims-bank-accounts-sentenced>

commit an alleged bank fraud worth an estimated 800,000. The Spanish National High Court ruled in favour of extraditing him, which was put into effect on 9 January 2018. In the US, he was sentenced to 48 months in prison and ultimately repatriated to Russia.

Peter Levashov¹⁰, another Russian hacker, was arrested by Spanish police in Barcelona on 7 April 2017, also at the request of the US. The National High Court approved his extradition and he was surrendered to the FBI on 2 February 2018. He pleaded guilty to creating a network of bots or automated computers, called *Ke-lihos*, which he used to control his victims remotely to send spam or junk mail and malicious programs that blocked access to personal information, allowing him to demand a ransom to unlock it. He was placed on supervised release in 2021.

When both hackers were arrested, Ionov presented himself to the international media as a representative and spokesman for both of them, and as vice president of the Russian office of an organisation called the International Human Rights Defence Committee. After Levashov was arrested, Ionov complained on the Russian-language RT channel that Spain had seized the programmer's computer equipment 'without any witnesses present', because the police could, from that moment on, 'have free access to his information, even add documents with harmful software¹¹'. At the same time, Russia requested the extradition of Levashov from Spain for the alleged 'hacking' of a hospital in St Petersburg, which was rejected by the National High Court.

¹⁰ Grand Jury Indictment of Peter Levashov, Connecticut, Case 3:17-cr-00083-RNC. 20/4/2017.

Link: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ct/page/file/1120591/download>

¹¹ 'US crackdown on Russian hackers ensnares notorious spammer', Erick Larson and Ilya Khrennikov, Bloomberg. 10/4/2017.

Link: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-04-10/u-s-crackdown-on-russian-hackers-ensnares-notorious-spammer?leadSource=uverify%20wall>

The first news stories published about Levashov's arrest pointed to his participation in interference in the campaign for the election won by Donald Trump in 2016, specifically the theft of information from Hillary Clinton, her campaign manager and the Democratic Party. The source of this information was actually his wife, who said in statements to RT that the officers showed her 'some papers in Spanish without a stamp, with a bad quality photo of him' and informed her of something 'about a virus ... linked to Trump winning the election'¹². Before this, Levashov worked for United Russia, Putin's party.

FBI investigators also found that Ionov cooperates with Yevgeny Prigozhin, the creator of a vast catering empire that achieved success thanks to its good relations with the Russian ruling class.

According to the US Treasury Department, which has imposed sanctions on Prigozhin, he 'facilitated attempts to interfere in US elections' through the so-called Internet Research Agency, 'which he utilizes to operate global influence operations. Prigozhin directs the generation of content to denigrate the US electoral process and funds Russian interference efforts while also attempting to evade sanctions by standing up front and shell companies both in and outside of Russia'. The US authorities add that 'Prigozhin's influence efforts extend beyond the United States' and 'Russia's efforts to promote false narratives on various topics, including Russia-Ukraine relations, rely on platforms associated with Prigozhin'¹³. These efforts, called 'Project Lakhta', will be discussed later in this report.

¹² 'Wife of Russian programmer "suspected of cyber attacks on US" shares details about his arrest', RT. 10/4/2017. Link: <https://www.rt.com/news/384268-russian-arrested-spain-us-hacking/>

¹³ 'Treasury sanctions Russians bankrolling Putin and Russia-backed influence actors', Department of the Treasury, press release. 3/3/2022
Link: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0628>

Project Lakhta: the great Russian interference campaign in the EU and the USA

Birth of Project Lakhta, 2014.

As seen above, the first news stories that began to spread disinformation about the independence movement in Catalonia and Spain were published on portals created and financed by the Kremlin, in particular Sputnik, which has been operating since 2014. This was, in point of fact, the year that a major political and election interference operation was launched, targeting members of the public inside the Russian Federation and in several other countries, including the US, EU Member States, Ukraine and Africa. The name of this operation is Project Lakhta and it is mentioned and analysed in the classified and declassified parts of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report on Russian interference in the 2016 US elections.¹⁴

¹⁴ 'Report on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election', Volumes I and II. Special Counsel Robert Mueller III. 03/2019.
Link: <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download>

According to the US intelligence investigators who uncovered the aforementioned project and who maintain that it was authorised by Putin himself, it was used by the Kremlin to use ‘a collection of official, proxy, and unattributed digital channels and platforms, such as outlets operated by Russian intelligence services and witting and unwitting propagators of the Kremlin’s narratives, to create and amplify misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda’. The same source adds: ‘One notable broad Kremlin interference effort is Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin’s Project Lakhta, which is a disinformation campaign and scheme funded by Prigozhin targeting audiences in the United States, **Europe**¹⁵, Ukraine, and even Russia¹⁶’.

According to a District of Columbia grand jury indictment against Prigozhin and two of his associates, dated February 2018, Project Lakhta began in 2014¹⁷, when the St Petersburg Internet Research Agency set up a translation department to focus on foreign audiences. In July 2016, the department engaged in interfering with social networks in the US in English had over 80 employees. The indictment, which arose from the investigations by Special Counsel Mueller, stated that Project Lakhta had a monthly budget of 1.2 million in 2016.

The project operated through Russian companies engaged in publishing and distributing content online, identified by the US Justice Department as Internet Research Agency LLC, Internet Research

¹⁵ The bold emphasis is the author’s.

¹⁶ ‘Treasury targets Russian operatives over election interference, World Anti-Doping Agency hacking, and other malign activities’, US Treasury Department Press Release, 19/12/2018.

Link: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm577>

¹⁷ Indictment against Internet Research Agency et al. by the Grand Jury of the District of Columbia. Case 18U.SC. §§ 2,371, 1349, 1028A. 16/2/2018

Link: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1035562/download>

LLC, MediaSintez LLC, GlavSet LLC, MixInfo LLC, Azimut LLC, NovInfo LLC, Nevskiy News LLC, Economy Today LLC, National News LLC, Federal News Agency LLC, International News Agency LLC and others. These companies allocated millions of dollars to their disinformation activities, according to the same source.

The Project Lakhta companies employed Russians who spoke a variety of languages, including Spanish, to post and disseminate content on social media and influence public opinion in the countries where they interfered. According to the investigations conducted in the US, these Russians posed as citizens of the countries concerned, to spread disinformation about electoral processes and political systems, in what are commonly known as troll farms (accounts with false identities managed by humans) and bots (automated accounts that share content to increase its popularity on social media). Technical studies, mentioned below, prove that accounts of this type were active in the Catalan independence crisis in Spain.

Project Lakhta had a substantial number of translators into languages such as English and Spanish who created or translated messages on social media with the arguments that they received about US, European and Ukrainian politics. The preferred digital platforms for disseminating this content were YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, according to US Treasury reports.

In the case of political interference in the US, analysed in detail by the US Department of Justice, the Translator Department's primary goal was to 'sow discord in the United States political system, incite civil unrest, and polarize Americans by promoting socially divisive issues, with particular emphasis on racial divisions and inequality in the United States'.

Funding for Project Lakhta was controlled by two companies, Concord Management and Consulting LLC and Concord

Catering, both owned by the aforementioned Prigozhin, nicknamed the ‘Kremlin chef’. Prigozhin, who was indicted in 2018, was subjected to sanctions, personally or through his companies, by the US federal government in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2022.

In the press release announcing sanctions against Ionov, the organiser of the pro-independence congresses in Moscow that originated fake news about Catalonia, the US Treasury stated that he cooperates with Prigozhin’s Project Lakhta entities to publish and disseminate disinformation. In the summer of 2021, Ionov contacted Prigozhin’s Foundation for Battling Injustice (FBI) to support candidates in the US gubernatorial elections in November 2022¹⁸.

The US has also sanctioned Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova, whom it identifies as the chief accountant in the Project Lakhta finance department, responsible for expenses related to advertising and social media campaigns, and for the legal registration of these operations. The US Treasury has proved that Khusyaynova was the accounting link between Project Lakhta and its disinformation operations and the companies controlled by the ‘chef’ Prigozhin: Concord Management and Consulting, and Concord Catering.

Russian disinformation media: RT and Sputnik.

RT and Sputnik, both Russian state-controlled media outlets, play a central role in the Kremlin’s vast network of disinformation. Various studies indicate that they are global megaphones for the Krem-

¹⁸ ‘Treasury targets the Kremlin’s continued malign political influence operations in the U.S. and globally’, US Treasury Department Press Release, 29/7/2022. Link: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0899>

lin's foreign policy objectives, a major component of disinformation and propaganda strategies, operating under the guise of conventional international media¹⁹. Sanctions were imposed on both outlets in the US and the EU following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 for acting as a mouthpiece for Kremlin disinformation and inciting hatred against Ukrainians²⁰.

Although the directors of both outlets deny that they follow the dictates of the Kremlin, a detailed Oxford University study in February 2021, with interviews with 23 former RT employees, states that 'the government control on RT includes hiring managers, imposing story angles, and, in some instances, disapproving of stories'²¹. One employee said he received training aimed at ensuring his coverage reflected the Kremlin's views. Another employee said the Russian government appoints a team to supervise the hiring of journalists at RT to ensure that new recruits are loyal.

According to a US Department of State report of January 2022, 'Instead of providing objective, fact-based reporting, RT and Sputnik operate as state-funded global messengers of Russian government disinformation and propaganda. The Kremlin uses these outlets in an attempt to gain political advantage when Russia does not benefit from

¹⁹ 'Background to "Assessing Russian activities and intentions in recent US elections": The analytic process and cyber incident attribution', Report from the US Director of National Intelligence. 6/1/2017.

Link: https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

²⁰ 'EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU', Council of the EU, press release. 2/3/2022. Link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>

²¹ "Anything that causes chaos": The organizational behavior of RT', Mona Elswah, Philip N Howard, *Journal of Communication*, Volume 70, Issue 5. 28/9/2020. Link: <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa027>

the truth²². RT and Sputnik cover 100 countries in approximately 30 languages and publish a substantial amount of content in Spanish.

Despite the Kremlin's opacity regarding these media outlets, there is a clear link between them. Margarita Simonyan is editor-in-chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya, the Russian government's international media consortium, the parent body of Sputnik. The latter platform was launched in November 2014 and contains online publications, radio broadcasts and social media channels. RT's parent body, TV-Novosti, was founded in turn by the RIA Novosti agency, and the assets of RIA Novosti as the founding body were subsequently transferred to Rossiya Segodnya by a decree issued in 2013. There is no verifiable data on funding, but several publications suggest that RT and Rossiya Segodnya received an annual budget of approximately 400 million prior to the invasion of Ukraine.

TV-Novosti's charter, which is not publicly available but has been obtained and disseminated by US intelligence, states the following:

The organization ensures the protection of information that constitutes state secrets, carries out work related to the use of state secrets, and also carries out activities and (or) provides services in the field of protecting state secrets²³.

Rossiia Segodnya's charter includes a similar clause about the protection of state secrets.

²² 'Kremlin-funded media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem', US Department of State Global Engagement Center. 1/2022 Link: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf

²³ Idem.

According to the American report, the statements made by the RT and Sputnik leadership indicating that they are public media just like European outlets and their defence that they only they report stories and views neglected by the West do not hold up, since ‘their coverage ... illustrates that the outlets are significant conduits for Kremlin talking points aimed at influencing foreign public opinion in a way that benefits Russia’s foreign policy and national security interests’.

The US State Department report highlights how RT and Sputnik often give prominent coverage to Wikileaks and Julian Assange, who frequently leak information and documents received from hackers working with or for Russian intelligence services. Assange played a crucial role in spreading disinformation about the independence process in Catalonia and met with businesspeople at the Ecuadorian embassy in London who were leaders of that movement, and were later arrested.

According to the US, RT and Simonyan have a close relationship with Assange. Indeed, RT broadcast a talk show hosted by Assange for a period of time. According to a 2017 US intelligence report, Simonyan visited Assange at the Ecuadorian embassy in 2013²⁴. The close relationship between RT and Wikileaks is demonstrated by the fact that in 2016 RT posted information on Twitter obtained from disclosures by Wikileaks about emails stolen from the Clinton campaign by Russian military intelligence, the GRU (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation).

²⁴ ‘Background to “Assessing Russian activities and intentions in recent US elections”’: The analytic process and cyber incident attribution’, Report from the US Director of National Intelligence. 6/1/2017. Link: https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

A 2019 report on Russian interference prepared for the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, which also quotes the case of disinformation in Catalonia, refers to numerous examples of communications between the GRU and Wikileaks about the Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party²⁵.

These media outlets have been establishing themselves throughout the world for about a decade. RT began operating in Spanish in 2009. Its audience is overwhelmingly digital, as it generally does not attain the minimum 0.1% share needed to be reflected in the ratings in markets where it broadcasts through traditional channels.

The pillars of Russian disinformation.

According to another declassified report from the US State Department, dated August 2020²⁶, the Kremlin's so-called disinformation ecosystem, its vast machine for advancing its interests abroad, has five pillars:

1. Official government communications: Such as the statements made by Putin in November 2017 comparing the cases of Catalonia, Ukraine and Kosovo, as will be seen below.
2. State-funded global messaging: RT, Sputnik and other state media that publish information aligned with the interests of the Kremlin.
3. Cultivation of proxy sources: International opinion writers, columnists and analysts who offer critical views of the EU, the US, NATO

²⁵ 'Putin's asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US national security', Democrat group in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. 10/1/2018. Link: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-115SPRT28110/html/CPRT-115SPRT28110.htm>

²⁶ 'GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem', US Department of State Global Engagement Center. 8/2020. Link: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

and others, and act as a source for posts on RT and Sputnik; they are interviewed or they post analytical articles on them.

4. Use of social media to amplify content: Fake accounts — trolls or bots — that amplify divisive or alarming content from RT, Sputnik and others to make it go viral and influence conversations on social media.
 - This section of the US report identifies the activity of Spanish-language fake accounts posting misinformation about the Catalan independence crisis. In the days before and after the illegal referendum on 1 October, the most shared news stories on Facebook and Twitter about the Catalan crisis very frequently included reports from RT. The issue was not the volume of news, but rather the topics chosen, which went viral in a matter of seconds. For example, the fake news story ‘The new map of Europe: Who supports independence for Catalonia’, a fake map showing which of Spain’s continental partners backed a new state. In a matter of hours, it led to over 5,000 interactions on Facebook, in a very short space of time. This behaviour is usually associated with buying traffic – paying for advertising, which is prohibited for RT on Twitter only – or the activity of botnets, automatic accounts that share a message solely to make its content go viral and appear on more users’ walls.
5. Hacking: Theft of documents or reports, hijacking of email accounts or private profiles, leaking of classified documents that may be used for scandalous disclosures about the politics or national security of EU countries or the US. The clear example given in this section is the theft of Clinton campaign emails by Russian military intelligence, which were leaked by Wikileaks.

Proxy sources in the Catalan crisis.

The use of proxy sources outlined in point three was of crucial importance in the Catalan independence crisis. Supposed experts without kind of any contact with Catalonia or Spain spawned alarmist headlines suggesting that the Spanish state and its partners in Brussels and Washington were taking part in the repression of a legitimate independence movement with majority support. These are some examples of the identity and activity of these sources:

- William Mallinson, an academic at Guglielmo Marconi online university in Rome, who has worked as a civil servant, third secretary and acting second secretary at British embassies in cities such as Nairobi. RT usually presents him as a ‘British diplomat’ and thanks to him it has published headlines in quotation marks such as ‘Why isn’t NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days²⁷’, ‘US warnings to Russia are unprofessional, threatening, tactless and undiplomatic’ and ‘Killing of Russian dissident Nemtsov a god-send for anybody against a strong Russia’.
- John Wight describes himself in his books as a novelist who gained experience as an extra and stuntman in Hollywood. RT and Sputnik – where he has a radio show – present him as a political analyst, who is important enough to provide these outlets with the following headlines: ‘Tanks on the streets of Barcelona: Spain and Catalonia on the verge of breaking into violence²⁸’,

²⁷ ‘Why isn’t NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days? – former British diplomat’, RT, 4/9/2017. Link: <https://www.rt.com/news/405659-catalonia-referendum-spain-serbia/>

²⁸ “‘Tanques en las calles de Barcelona’: España y Cataluña al borde de un desenlace violento’, RT, 28/9/2017. Link in Spanish: <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/253812-espana-cataluna-violencia-conflicto>

‘The Spanish are coming!: Spanish Army tanks deployed in Latvia to deter Russia’ and ‘Will tanks take to the streets on the day of the Catalonia independence referendum?’.

- Pepe Escobar, a political scientist who gives frequent interviews on RT and Sputnik and also posts on a website called Strategic Culture Foundation, run directly by Russian intelligence, according to the US. Escobar was interviewed by Sputnik on 22 February and he accused Joe Biden of being ‘a puppet’ of the American powers-that-be, including Hillary Clinton, who are driven by ‘Russophobia’ and ‘confrontation with Russia by any means necessary with a single goal, to cut Russia off from the European economy’. In the past, Escobar has also posted on Global Research, a Canadian website awash with conspiracy theorists who are closely aligned with Russia, according to the aforementioned US report. One of the topics discussed by Escobar on Global Research was the Catalan independence crisis in 2017 and he said in an article that Spain was living in a state of permanent fascism, governed at the time by someone he called ‘Nano-Franco’, that is, Mariano Rajoy.
- Aim of the campaign of interference: justifying the annexation of Ukraine.

There is evidence that the strategy of interference pursued by these Russian state media outlets throughout Europe intensified in the years before the latest invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The aim in part was to influence international audiences, including Spanish speakers, to justify the aggression against Ukraine. As has been seen, one of the first fake news stories in the Russian campaign of interference in the Catalan independence crisis, in 2014, focused on Ukraine and asserted that an independent Catalonia would recognise Russia’s right to annex parts of the country.

However, the independence movement is not the only sector that has been cheered on by the Russian media. When they took office, former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain Pablo Iglesias and his party, Podemos, declared that Ukraine was ruled by neo-Nazis²⁹. And in another of the most notorious forays of Russia's disinformation machine, Kremlin-run state media asserted, along with Iglesias and Alberto Garzón, that a prominent Ukrainian footballer who plays in Spain was a neo-Nazi because he wore his country's emblem on his shirt³⁰.

Ukraine has been a central part of the Russian strategy of provoking and exacerbating crises within the EU and NATO, using its formidable disinformation machine. And much of that disinformation has been carried out in Spanish and with Spain as the target. Now that Putin has invaded Ukraine, it is clear that the campaign of fake news was paving the way for this decisive moment for the Kremlin, in an attempt to secure sympathy or silence from politicians, analysts and ordinary people in response to the aggression.

According to José Ignacio Torreblanca, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations in Madrid, 'Spain is a country that is amenable to disinformation campaigns of this type originating from Russia, because, on the one hand, there is still a strong anti-American sentiment in a significant part of the Spanish left and, on the other hand, as happens in so many EU countries, the extreme right has a certain admiration for Putin's authoritarianism and his defence of tra-

²⁹ 'Pablo Iglesias: La UE no puede apoyar a los neonazis del Gobierno de Ucrania', Pilar Casanova. Sputnik. 15/9/2014. Link in Spanish: <https://sputniknews.lat/20140915/Pablo-Iglesias-La-UE-no-puede-apoyar-a-los-neonazis-de-l-Gobierno-de-Ucrania-161861363.html>

³⁰ 'El futbolista Zozulia anuncia una demanda contra Pablo Iglesias por llamarlo "neonazi"'. The Objective. 28/5/2019. Link in Spanish: <https://theobjective.com/espana/2019-05-28/el-futbolista-zozulia-anuncia-una-demanda-contra-pablo-iglesias-por-llamarlo-neonazi/>

ditional values'. According to Torreblanca, the Russian strategy is 'not so much telling lies that can be easily debunked, but rather using these media outlets and their "amplifiers" in Spain to influence people who follow these accounts and turn them into Russian disinformation agents. These agencies and media outlets don't only misinform, they actually use the people who follow them to misinform others³¹'.

There were multiple and frequent contacts in Russia on the part of businesspeople and intermediaries close to former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont, according to judicial investigations in Spain. Aside from the intentions of the pro-independence movement, Russian propaganda was launched in 2017 to exacerbate the crisis, portraying Spain as a fascist country and Catalonia as a victim, in the same manner in which Ukraine was portrayed as supposedly oppressing the pro-Russian provinces in the east whose independence Putin recognised a week before the invasion was ordered.

Amplifying disinformation: bots and trolls.

The EU and NATO strategic communications analysis centres³² have analysed the phenomenon of disinformation from a technical perspective and reached the conclusion that it is divided into two stages: creation and amplification. They are both of key importance in Project Lakhta's mode of operation.

To distribute fake news, it is usually necessary to have a website to publish it with at least some semblance of credibility, as is the case for the Russian propaganda outlets, which are fully funded by the Kremlin.

³¹ Interview with the author, 2022.

³² 'NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19', NATO report. 17/7/2020. Link: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>

Then, the disinformation must be distributed, posted on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok) and spread on private messaging services (WhatsApp, Telegram, Messenger), gaining visibility on search engines (Google, Bing). This distribution can be undertaken on an industrial scale to reach millions of people quickly by using trolls and bots. These are fake accounts designed to manipulate the algorithms of the major content publishing platforms to make content go viral.

It is a complex task to measure the activity of trolls and bots because they are profiles created on social networks and protected by legislation on the right to privacy which governs digital communications in the US, where the internet platforms are based. Detailed studies have been made of accounts that have switched from posting content praising Trump in the US to defending the Maduro regime in Venezuela, justifying Russia's annexation of Crimea along the way.

These profiles, as Special Counsel Mueller has shown in the US, are largely controlled by companies set up or managed by Prigozhin, the Russian businessman mentioned earlier.

Twitter has admitted that bots or automated accounts were active during the independence referendum in Catalonia in 2017. In June 2019, the social network closed 130 accounts 'directly attached' to the separatist party Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, some with as many as 13,000 followers, for posting disinformation 'created with the intent to inorganically influence the conversation on the network in politically advantageous ways'³³. These accounts, now deleted, dis-

³³ 'Twitter deletes thousands of accounts tied to Iran, seeks to end false info campaigns', Reuters. 13/6/2019. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/twitter-iran/twitter-deletes-thousands-of-accounts-tied-to-iran-seeks-to-end-false-info-campaigns-idINKCN1TE2G2?edition-redirect=in>

seminated content from Russian propaganda outlets. Twitter also closed hundreds of accounts based in Russia, Venezuela and Iran.

Nevertheless, disinformation does not need bots and automatic accounts to spread through the information universe, because human psychology is predisposed to lean towards fake news. This phenomenon was the subject of an influential study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology based on 126,000 rumours and false news stories published in English on Twitter from 2006 to 2017, with messages that reached three million users³⁴.

The authors, Sinan Aral, Soroush Vosoughi and Deb Roy, found that a false news story reaches readers six times faster than a genuine one. This is the case for every field, such as finance, science and technology, but especially politics. 'False political news traveled deeper and more broadly, reached more people, and was more viral than any other category of false information,' say the authors. They draw the conclusion from their analysis that falsehoods are 70% more likely to be shared on social networks than the truth.

There are several reasons for this behaviour. Why would someone prefer to share a story that says 'Tanks on the streets of Barcelona' rather than one that simply states 'Any Catalan officials who fail to follow orders may be removed', both posted on the same day? According to the authors of the MIT study, the main reason is that the first headline is novel and surprising: 'novelty attracts human attention, contributes to productive decision making, and encourages information-sharing. In essence, it can update our understanding of the world. When information is novel, it is not only surprising, but also more valuable'. Generally speaking, according to the authors, the most

³⁴ 'The spread of true and false news online', Sinan Aral, Soroush Vosoughi and Deb Roy, Science. 8/3/2018. Link: <https://ide.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2017-IDE-Research-Brief-False-News.pdf>

effective messages include information that has not appeared on the user's social networks over the previous 60 days.

In addition, the status factor is important: many users feel gratified when they share information that no one else appears to have and that they pass on to their followers. Ironically, by spreading rumours and fake news, we come across as well-informed, with access to hitherto hidden secrets.

Another factor in addition to novelty is emotion. The authors of the MIT study created a database of the adjectives used to rate the 126,000 false news stories they detected. Using a semantic classification program for emotions, they discovered that users who shared the rumours and lies tended to express mostly surprise or anger. Real news stories were usually spread with adjectives associated with sadness or trust, less powerful feelings when it comes to reacting and sharing the content in question.

As such, the main problem with disinformation is its very existence as a weapon to destabilise democratic processes and institutions. A large proportion of fake stories, like the ones that predominated in the news coverage of the Catalan crisis, are created for political purposes and replicated on digital platforms, harnessing the architecture of their algorithms and not just manipulating them by technological means.

In fact, the crisis is much more serious because it affects patterns of human behaviour. The people behind these campaigns are aware that headlines like 'Tanks on the streets of Barcelona', 'Why isn't NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days?' and 'Over 900 people injured during the referendum' are more novel and surprising than others containing factual information. And this is what institutions must combat to protect the democratic and constitutional framework.

Disinformation about the Catalan independence crisis

First news stories about Catalan independence in the Kremlin-run state media, 2014.

The great Russian disinformation machine began posting about European independence movements at the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine, in 2014. It is worth highlighting that this is the year Sputnik and Project Lakhta were created. This is demonstrated by a release from the Russian state-owned news agency Tass, published on 2 March of that year, seven months before the first, non-binding vote on Catalan independence, sanctioned by Mariano Rajoy's government in Spain. The release attributed to anonymous sources 'from the government of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea' a plan to replicate 'the experience gained by Scotland and Catalonia in preparing referendums on their political future'.

The news story entitled 'Crimea's authorities to use experience of Scotland, Catalonia in preparing referendum'³⁵ linked the future of Crimea, even then, with that of several independence

³⁵ 'Crimea's authorities to use experience of Scotland, Catalonia in preparing referendum'. Itar-Tass. 2/3/2014. Link: <https://tass.com/world/721692>).

movements in the EU. The Crimean referendum took place on 16 March 2014, just 14 days after the release was published by Tass, with a result of 96.77% in favour and allegations of poll rigging and fraud from the Ukrainian government. Votes were held in Scotland on 18 September and in Catalonia on 9 November.

The Tass release states: ‘Officials in Crimea are confident this will mean that the campaign, the goal of which is to revise the status of the region upwards to a full-fledged state from an autonomous entity, will be conducted in line with all the norms accepted in the current European regional policies’. Without providing further details, the Russian public agency stated: ‘In Catalonia, a referendum on sovereignty from Spain is due to be held November 9’. It did not mention that it was not a binding referendum and that the pro-constitution parties were going to boycott it.

As seen above, in the weeks before and after the illegal independence referendum in Catalonia of 1 October 2017, a substantial number of news stories were published in a major disinformation campaign by Russian public media outlets like RT and Sputnik. Despite the fact that the internet was rife with articles falsely warning of military intervention, civil war and ethnic cleansing in Spain, the spreaders of Russian disinformation denied any responsibility, claiming that the Kremlin had no interest in Catalonia.

The truth is that from the very beginning, as shown by the aforementioned Tass note and others from 2014 on media outlets like Sputnik and RT, the vast Russian disinformation machine sought to legitimise the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and fan the flames of the phenomenon of independence movements in the EU.

The Russian government launched the Sputnik outlet on 10 November 2014, the day after the non-binding independence vote was held in Catalonia. One of its first notes is entitled ‘2014: A Year

of Secession - Venice, Scotland, Crimea, Catalonia and... Miami³⁶’. The anonymous author of the note said that the majority of the people of Catalonia had voted in favour of breaking away from Spain in a referendum because ‘residents there [Catalonia] are speaking Catalan, a completely different language’ and ‘their distinct culture drives much of the desire for an independent State’, which is feasible because ‘the region is also one of Spain’s wealthiest making up about 20 percent of Spain’s gross domestic product’.

After mentioning the case of Scotland, where the ‘no’ vote won in the independence referendum, the author moved on to Crimea. The wording of that part of the note is an exercise in propaganda: ‘Also in March, the now-former Ukraine region known as Crimea held its own plebiscite and declared itself a sovereign state before then joining the Russian Federation. Unlike in the aforementioned votes, Crimean voters acted following a coup and change in administration in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev prompting the Russian majority in Crimea to organize the referendum’. There was no mention of the intervention of the Russian army or the actual nature of the operation: the annexation of Ukrainian territory by Moscow.

Two years later came the note, also from Sputnik, entitled ‘An independent Catalonia will recognise that Crimea is Russian’, seen above, as a result of the activity of Ionov, the FSB collaborator.

Creation of disinformation during the illegal referendum in 2017

In 2017 Catalan political leaders called an independence referendum which was declared illegal by the Spanish courts. Despite the Spanish government’s attempt to prevent it, a vote was held on 1

³⁶ ‘2014: A Year of Secession - Venice, Scotland, Crimea, Catalonia and... Miami?’, Sputnik, 10/11/2014 Link: <https://sputniknews.com/20141110/1013208629.html>

October, followed by a unilateral declaration of independence which was suspended.

During the referendum, the healthcare authorities in Catalonia reported 1,066 injuries as a result of police charges. Months after the poll, the Catalan Government revealed that 30 of the injuries were due to trauma, 23 to fractures, 383 to multiple contusions, 435 to contusions, 50 to wounds, 36 to collapses and 3 to arrhythmia, with 28 cases of anxiety and two of conjunctivitis. In other words, for the most part, they were people complaining of having been hit by something who had required no more than a simple examination. It is true that some presented injuries, as the actual photos from the day revealed. However, it would have been more accurate to say that Catalan medical services treated over 800 people, of whom fewer than a hundred had been hit and two were seriously injured.

Nevertheless, in the midst of a great deal of confusion, the Russian disinformation media published a large amount of manipulated information, with alarming headlines and statements. These are just a few examples:

- RT: 'POWERFUL VIDEOS: Brutal police repression of voters in the Catalan referendum', 'Catalonia chooses its own destiny among batons and rubber bullets', 'Catalonia: Police charges and violence against voters during the 1 October poll'.
- In addition, RT published false testimony from an activist: 'They broke my fingers: Woman filmed being beaten by the Police in the Catalan referendum'. This last testimony attracted attention worldwide. Marta Torrecilla, who voted at one of the polling stations where the police intervened, reported that she was the victim of sexual assault and the fingers on one of her hands were broken.

The video of her statement, made by a friend on a mobile phone and later broadcast by RT, showed her with a bandage on her left arm. ‘When we were halfway up the stairs, he started to grab all my fingers. He started bending all my fingers backwards one by one. I don’t know if they’re broken or sprained because I haven’t had an x-ray yet, but I heard my bones crack. I was defending some elderly people because they hit children, they hit elderly people halfway up the stairs with their clothes lifted up, they touched my breasts and laughed’, she said in the video. In RT’s opinion, ‘her shocking story illustrates the level of police violence during this historic day for the Spanish nation’. However, Torrecilla’s testimony did not match the images that accompanied it. They showed two national police officers dragging the woman down the stairs, pulling on her left hand, but the bandage was on her right hand. Her statements proved to be false. Torrecilla herself went on Catalan public television on 3 October to explain that: ‘At that point I was in a lot of pain after I’d been hit and I was saying that my fingers were broken because that’s the first thing you think of when you’re in that situation’. Although it was initially reported that she had broken all the fingers on her right hand, she proved to have just one inflamed finger on her left hand.

- On 11 October, RT published one of its most notorious headlines in this crisis: ‘The new map of Europe: Who supports independence for Catalonia³⁷?’. It was accompanied by a map stating that Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium and Slovenia

³⁷ ‘The new map of Europe: Who supports independence for Catalonia?’, RT. 11/10/2017. Modified news story. Edited link in Spanish: <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/252564-nuevo-mapa-europa-apoyo-cataluna>.

had officially shown support for the Catalan state. The Russian channel's Spanish-language profile on Facebook stated: 'The Catalan independence process has shaken not only Spain, but also the rest of the continent. Several countries have shown support for the independence movement'. As usual on RT, the headline and the content of the note changed over the following weeks, to attempt to tweak the lie and the manipulation. The original note, however, led to 6,300 interactions on Facebook.

- "Tanks on the streets of Barcelona": Spain and Catalonia on the verge of breaking into violence', story published on 28 October 2017.
- 'Domino effect: If Catalonia gains independence, as many as 45 new countries could emerge in Europe', published by RT on 24 October

Julian Assange: ties to Russian intelligence and role in the Catalan crisis

At the height of the fake news campaign in Catalonia, one of the experts most frequently quoted by both Sputnik and RT was the founder of Wikileaks, Julian Assange, who was then a fugitive from justice in the Ecuadorian embassy in London and whose extradition was requested by the US Justice Department in 2022 on several spying charges.

Although Assange was not an expert on Spanish or Catalan politics, the Russian media used statements by him at conferences and on social media to publish headlines such as:

- 'Echoes of Franco in Spain's "political repression" in Catalonia'.
- 'The world's first world war has begun in Catalonia'.
- 'Brutal police repression of voters in the Catalan referendum'.

- ‘Assange asks Juncker to suspend Spain from the EU because of the violence in Catalonia’
- ‘Assange points a finger at Warner Bros for associating themselves “with the crushing of Catalan democracy”’.

The government of Ecuador revoked Assange’s asylum in April 2019 because it considered that he was involved in campaigns of interference ‘that seek to compromise the institutions of other countries and affect citizens’ right to privacy’, as the then Ecuadorian president, Lenín Moreno, told me during an interview in Washington, published in the ABC newspaper in April 2019³⁸.

The American Special Counsel Mueller, who conducted the investigation into the network of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election in the US, asserted in his report of March 2019 that Assange and Wikileaks coordinated with Russia to cause detriment to Clinton, in addition to other issues to undermine American democracy³⁹.

The Wikileaks founder began to share his thoughts about Catalonia and the independence movement on 9 September 2017, less than a month before the referendum. ‘Spain, this will not work in Catalonia. The Catalan people have a right to self-determination. Arrests only unify and strengthen them’, said Assange in his first tweet on the subject. Below these words, he attached the famous

³⁸ ‘Lenín Moreno, presidente de Ecuador: “Julian Assange violó reiteradamente las convenciones de asilo”’, David Alandete, Diario ABC, 19/4/2019. Link in Spanish: https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-lenin-moreno-presidente-ecuador-julian-assange-violo-reiteradamente-convenciones-asilo-201904182021_noticia.html

³⁹ ‘Report on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election’, Volumes I and II. Special Counsel Robert Mueller III. 3/2019. Link: <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download>

photo of a man standing alone in front of a column of tanks during the Tiananmen Square protests in the People's Republic of China in 1989, in which thousands of people died.

From that point on, Assange posted every day about the referendum and the Spanish government's attempts to prevent it. On 29 September he said: 'The world's first internet war has begun, in Catalonia, as the people and government use it to organize an independence referendum on Sunday and Spanish intelligence attacks, freezing telecommunications links, occupying telecoms buildings, censors 100s of sites, protocols etc.'

On 9 October, after the referendum and the police charges, he asserted: 'The Spanish state is clearly determined to push Catalonia into a UDI. Just like Hitler used an ethnic minority to drive the ethnic majority into his arms. PP is doing the same. By refusing all mediation or dialog, Rajoy leaves only UDI, which will unite Castilians behind PP'.

None of Assange's predictions came true. There was no ethnic cleansing, the unilateral declaration of independence was suspended, Spain was not expelled from the EU and there was no civil war. The founder of Wikileaks identified himself as an ally of the independence cause, a non-neutral party.

Moreover, the fact that Assange was in contact with independence movement leaders was demonstrated by an exclusive published by El País in November 2017⁴⁰: the businessman and publisher Oriol Soler, one of the most significant ideologues and promoters of the Catalan independence movement, met with As-

⁴⁰ 'Un ideólogo clave en la secesión se reunió con Assange en Londres', Rafa de Miguel, El País. 13/11/2019.
https://elpais.com/politica/2017/11/12/actualidad/1510497199_316581.html

sange at the Ecuadorian embassy in London on 9 November 2017, over a month after the referendum. Neither the parties present nor Assange's lawyer, Baltasar Garzón, have agreed to reveal what was discussed at that meeting.

Soler is a central figure in the Catalan independence movement. He was one of the founders of the Ara newspaper and is in charge of the SOM cultural cooperative, which publishes magazines such as *Sàpiens* and owns the audiovisual production company Batabat. All of them are key levers in the strategy of creating a parallel information environment in Catalonia.

However, there is a comprehensive 10-page report on Soler's visit, with details on logistics, the work of a group of investigators and mercenaries paid by the Ecuadorian government who were supposed to guarantee Assange's safety in London, at a total cost to the Ecuadorian state of over 4 million⁴¹.

The company hired by the last two Ecuadorian governments, UC Global, is Spanish and is based in Jerez de la Frontera. In the report in question, written in Spanish and generically titled 'Catalonia', UC Global states that the interview lasted three hours and 'after it was over, everyone left in a good mood, leading us to conclude that it had a positive outcome'.

The UC Global report states that the 'move towards the positions and support for the cause of Catalan independence exhibited by Julian Assange during the recent events with regard to the rebellion of the government of Catalonia against Spanish governmental and institutional authorities are the result of the relation-

⁴¹ "La vida de Assange según los españoles que lo vigilaban", José Manuel Abad Liñán, *El País*. 15/4/2019. Link in Spanish: https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/04/13/actualidad/1555189138_144555.html

ships that JA maintains with links and organisations associated with the radical Catalan independence movement’.

Minutes after the meeting, Assange posted one of his incendiary messages on Twitter: ‘Why I am so interested in Catalonia: Attacks on WikiLeaks: electronic+physical spying, censorship, judicial corruption, arrests, extradition, imprisonment, exile, financial blockades, fake news+propaganda, pressuring allied states. Attacks on Catalonia: Exactly the same’.

After the exclusive story was published in *El País*, Soler confirmed that the meeting had taken place, without further explanation. He only said: ‘We Catalans have also suffered electronic and physical spying, censorship, judicial irregularities, arrests, extradition attempts, imprisonment, exile, financial blockades, fake news, counter-propaganda, like Julian Assange, and we shared our views on the current situation’. It is the same argument, point by point, that Assange posted on Twitter minutes after the meeting.

Days later, Soler leaked another version to pro-independence media: he supposedly went to London to promote a project called Atlas of the Future, created by the foundation Democratizing the Future Society, established on 17 February 2016, according to the *Coordinadora Catalana de Fundacions* (a Catalan association representing foundations).

The registration lists the president as Soler and the secretary as Andreu Grinyó, marketing director of Ulabox supermarket, who was present at the embassy meeting. Barcelona City Council awarded a 30,000 grant to the foundation before it was registered. Previously, the institution had operated as a private business registered as a limited company, with a sole director: Soler. In the second quarter of 2014, the company received its first grant, also in the amount of 30,000.

The Spanish intelligence services also know that Soler travelled to the city of Saint Petersburg in Russia on 5 June, before the referendum. Soler was arrested in 2020 along with other suspects in an operation targeting the network set up by the organisation Tsunami Democràtic, which coordinated the protests against the judgment that convicted the leaders of the procès (Catalan independence process)⁴².

Assange has also received payments from RT in the past. In 2012, he presented a series called ‘The World Tomorrow’, broadcast on the network’s English, Arabic and Spanish-language channels, with guests such as the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, and the president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa. In a programme about the Occupy Wall Street movement, Assange admitted that his show would focus on ‘revolutionary ideas than can change the world’. Wikileaks credits Assange with the content of the show, produced by the company Quick Roll, but in the presentation it was admitted that the Russian government bought the priority broadcasting rights to the programme, which was then licensed to other media outlets.

Assange has refused to reveal how much he was paid by RT for the programmes, but he has become a veritable hero for the channel since they were broadcast. Some of the headlines that have been published there in recent years:

- ‘Treatment of Julian Assange is torture’.
- ‘Protests in London in support of Assange over possible loss of political asylum’.

⁴² ‘La Guardia Civil detiene a los empresarios que montaron Tsunami Democràtic’, José María Olmo and Antonio Fernández, *El Confidencial*. 28/10/2020. Link in Spanish: https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-10-28/la-guardia-civil-detiene-empresarios-lideres-tsunami-democratic_2808820/

- ‘Assange works for the people and now we have to save him’.
- ‘Assange’s life could be in danger if justice is not impartial’.

Content amplification: technical analysis of social networks.

During the 1 October referendum, the researcher Javier Lesaca, from George Washington University in the US, performed a detailed analysis of the social media conversation about the independence referendum using data provided by the digital platforms themselves through their APIs, an abbreviation of ‘Application Programming Interface’, which makes it possible to connect to their databases, with huge amounts of information.

Lesaca’s conclusions, obtained with the Constella Intelligence Analyzer service and published in *The Washington Post*⁴³, are clear: ‘All of that strongly indicates that 84 percent of the key accounts that systematically and broadly disseminated RT and Sputnik’s Catalonia content are most likely digital bots’. In other words, there was concerted activity to activate dormant, automated accounts designed to amplify independence-related messages, generally with a positive tone.

Lesaca found that on 1 October 2017, the day of the referendum, the hashtag #Catalanreferendum was most popular in the world on the social network Twitter for 12 hours. What is surprising about his analysis is that the Russian media conglomerate formed by RT and Sputnik combined was the fourth most-used source and their content was virally distributed as part of the digital debate. Russian state

⁴³ ‘Why did Russian social media swarm the digital conversation about Catalan independence?’, Javier Lesaca, *The Washington Post*. 22/11/2022. Link: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/22/why-did-russian-social-media-swarm-the-digital-conversation-about-catalan-independence/>

media, which act as propaganda outlets for the Kremlin, were shared 10 times more than those published by the Spanish state-run television network RTVE or the EFE news agency.

The Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* ranked first, with 5,095 articles published. It was followed by *Eldiario.es*, the BBC and *El País*. Next was Russian propaganda. Together, RT and Sputnik distributed 47,964 Catalonia-related posts that reached up to 125.9 million users. That is 1.7 times greater than the distribution of news on the subject from *El País*, Spain's leading newspaper.

The study also revealed that the most influential users in that conversation were geolocated in Venezuela, distributing content from RT and Sputnik, and also from Telesur. Russian state media outlets often share content with the major 'chavista' platform, as the two governments are partners and allies.

Lesaca analysed the 100 accounts that were most active in spreading the Russian media link, revealing a disturbing figure: 84% of those accounts are anonymous, and most of them appear to be controlled by digital bots. In total, he collected more than 5 million digital messages posted on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and others from 29 September to 5 October that included the words 'Cataluña' (Spanish), 'Catalonia' (English) or 'Catalunya' (Catalan).

As the researcher concluded: 'Only nine of the 100 most active accounts seem to follow human behavior in their publishing and interaction strategies. Seven other accounts correspond to official RT and Sputnik profiles on social networks. The remaining 84 accounts cannot be identified with any real person or institution; do not generate any original content or posts; and propagate others' links and social media posts in a constant, systematic and

massive way, in most cases using RT and Sputnik as their main source’.

RT published a substantial number of pictures and videos of people who were injured during the clashes with the police. 50% of its 10 most shared posts and links decried the actions of the Spanish police, in many cases with false or exaggerated information, as described in another section. Another 20% highlighted how much harm Catalan independence would do to the Spanish economy; 20% offered an apparently neutral approach; and 10% criticised and attacked the Spanish Government.

Meanwhile, the 10 most-shared Sputnik posts on Catalonia were sympathetic towards the narrative of the Catalan pro-independence groups. Forty percent of these decried the actions of the Spanish police; 30 percent criticised the Spanish prime minister; and 30 percent drew attention to international support for Catalan independence.

Lesaca later published in *El País* an analysis of several automated accounts that shared the same content.⁴⁴ He found, for example, that from 29 September to 9 October, the users Ivan (@Ivan226622), Rick (@rickrick888) and Bobbit (@bobbit2266) each disseminated 139 news stories created by RT and Sputnik about Catalonia, most of which were critical of Spanish institutions.

According to an article published by the US scientific journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*⁴⁵ in November 2018, bots played a vital role in inflaming passions on social media

⁴⁴ ‘Los zombis de la desinformación’, Javier Lesaca, *El País*, 12/11/2017. Link in Spanish: https://elpais.com/politica/2017/11/12/actualidad/1510498943_521481.html

⁴⁵ ‘Bots increase exposure to negative and inflammatory content in online social systems’, Massimo Stella, Emilio Ferrara, and Manlio De Domenico, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*. 20/11/2018. Link: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1803470115>

during the independence referendum. The experts — Massimo Stella and Manlio De Domenico (Fondazione Bruno Kessler) and Emilio Ferrara (USC Information Sciences Institute) — analysed almost four million Twitter messages generated by nearly one million users between 22 September and 3 October 2017 and found two polarised groups supporting independence and the constitutional status quo.

The researchers found that ‘bots act from peripheral areas of the social system to target influential humans of both groups, bombarding Independentists with violent contents, increasing their exposure to negative and inflammatory narratives, and exacerbating social conflict online’. Overall, this analysis found that bots produced 23.6% of the total number of posts during the referendum, but also interacted with real users who were posting their own content: 19% of overall interactions are directed from bots to humans, mainly through retweets.

Part 2

ESPIONAGE
AND CONSPIRACY

Putin compares the Catalonia crisis to Ukraine

SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE HAS ALWAYS PLAYED A PROMINENT ROLE IN RUSSIA'S INTERFERENCE campaigns in EU countries and the US, seen as a way of undermining states that the Kremlin considers adversaries. However, it is a rather ambiguous concept, since supporting separatism in Russia carries a sentence of up to five years in prison⁴⁶ under an amendment to the Penal Code adopted in 2014, the same year that Crimea was annexed, and drafted earlier.

The Kremlin has defended Crimea's right to separate from Ukraine and join Russia, while it has simultaneously criticised much of Europe and the US for recognising Kosovo's independence from Serbia, quashed the Chechen separatists and convicted dozens of Russians who called for the secession of Russian territories such as Karelia, Siberia and the Urals.

The connection between the case of Crimea and that of Catalonia as parties that are supposedly fighting for separation from oppressive states — Ukraine and Spain — has been made repeatedly by

⁴⁶ 'How "separatists" are prosecuted in Russia: Independent lawyers on one of Russia's most controversial statutes', Meduza, 21/9/2016. Link: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2016/09/21/how-separatists-are-prosecuted-in-russia>

Russian leaders, as seen above, since 2014, the year of the first invasion of Ukraine.

On 6 March that year, Sergey Neverov, secretary of the General Council of United Russia, Putin's party, and deputy chairman of the Russian State Duma, gave the example of Catalan separatism as an argument to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea. He said: 'Why can't Crimea leave Ukraine? Catalonia is going to withdraw from Spain', he stated, referring to the referendum that some Catalan parties were already trying to organise at the time⁴⁷.

But it was actually Putin himself who in 2017, days after the illegal independence referendum in Catalonia, linked the cases of Spain and Ukraine together in a high-profile speech on separatism and other challenges to the world order. It occurred on 19 October at the Valdai forum, an annual meeting of academics and politicians held in the town of Sochi, sold as a 'Slav Davos forum'.

The speech demonstrated that equating the situation in Catalonia with that in Crimea was not only a focus of interest for the Russian disinformation media. It figured among the reports and priorities of Putin himself, an argument that had originated from the highest spheres of the Kremlin. Sputnik, RT and other Russian-language media had been laying the groundwork for these statements.

The title of the 2017 conference was: 'Creative destruction: Will a New World Order Emerge from the Current Conflicts?'. After mentioning the war in Syria and US tensions with North Korea, the Russian president turned to the subject of Catalonia⁴⁸. 'The situation

⁴⁷ 'Неверов назвал историческим решением парламента Крыма', Statement on the website of the Russia First party. 6/3/2014. Link in Russian: https://kursk.er.ru/activity/news/neverov-nazval-istoricheskim-reshenie-parlamenta-kryma_1263707

⁴⁸ Vladimir Putin's speech at the Valdai Forum, full text translated into English. 19/10/2011. Link: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>

in Spain clearly shows how fragile stability can be even in a prosperous and established state. Who could have expected, even just recently, that the discussion of the status of Catalonia, which has a long history, would result in an acute political crisis?', he said, then formally reiterated his position that 'everything that is happening is an internal matter for Spain and must be settled based on Spanish law in accordance with democratic traditions'.

Then Putin added:

In the case of Catalonia, we saw the European Union and a number of other states unanimously condemn the supporters of independence. You know, in this regard, I cannot help but note that more thought should have gone into this earlier. What, no one was aware of these centuries-old disagreements in Europe? They were, were they not? Of course, they were. However, at one point they actually welcomed the disintegration of a number of states in Europe without hiding their joy. Why were they so unthinking, driven by fleeting political considerations and their desire to please – I will put it bluntly – their big brother in Washington, in providing their unconditional support to the secession of Kosovo, thus provoking similar processes in other regions of Europe and the world? You may remember that when Crimea also declared its independence, and then – following the referendum – its decision to become part of Russia, this was not welcomed for some reason. Now we have Catalonia. There is a similar issue in another region, Kurdistan. Perhaps this list is far from exhaustive. But we have to ask ourselves, what are we going to do? What should we think about it?

The argument was that the EU and the West accepted an independence movement that they liked, that of Kosovo regarding Serbia, but they did not look favourably on others, such as in Crimea and Catalonia, which he again equated.

Putin ignored the fact that the annexation of Crimea with Russia took place after a referendum in breach of Ukrainian legis-

lation and under the supervision of masked Russian soldiers who occupied the region. The constitutions of neither Ukraine nor Spain, nor Russia, envisage the possibility of secession by means of a regional referendum.

It is also significant that Putin mentioned the case of Kosovo, because it is another of the common threads of the Russian disinformation machine. As seen above, a headline on 4 October from the English-language RT service said: ‘Why isn’t NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days?’. That sentence was subsequently attributed to a ‘former British diplomat’, William Mallinson, also identified above as a regular source of Russian disinformation, who compared the cases of Catalonia and Kosovo. Mallinson said in the note:

Why isn’t NATO bombing Madrid for 78 days, because the situation is similar in very many ways? In fact, Kosovo is even more a part of Serbia than Catalonia [is to Spain]. Let’s remember in the Middle Ages joined [*sic*] when Ferdinand and Isabella united all those bits of Spain together. Let’s remember that Spain is a united country but it is a conglomerate. We must also remember this dangerous knock-on effect. This is going to feed Basque anger more and more. And of course, other parts of Europe, possibly even the Walloons in Belgium, not to mention Scotland.

The 1999 NATO bombing was part of an undeclared war between most member countries of the Alliance and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, during the war for the independence of Kosovo. NATO did not request prior authorisation from the UN Security Council, where Russia has veto rights. The attacks took place from 24 March to 11 June 1999 and killed as many as 1,500 civilians, according to reports by NATO itself.

Russian military spies in Barcelona during the 2017 referendum

RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN THE CATALAN INDEPENDENCE CRISIS IS NOT LIMITED to disinformation activities. As several investigations have subsequently revealed, Russian spies were present in Catalonia before and during the illegal independence referendum in 2017. In addition, after the referendum, until 2020, prominent Catalan independence leaders were in contact with Russian officials and businesspeople who play a vital role in Russia's so-called hybrid war against the US and the EU, a strategy that includes propaganda, disinformation, hacking and direct attacks such as assassination attempts in the UK.

These contacts occurred alongside the flight of seven independence leaders abroad — Carles Puigdemont, Meritxell Serret, Antonio Comín, Lluís Puig, Clara Ponsatí, Anna Gabriel and Marta Rovira — and the arrest, trial and conviction for sedition of another nine — Oriol Junqueras, Jordi Turull, Raül Romeva, Joaquim Forn, Josep Rull, Jordi Cuixart, Jordi Sánchez, Carme Forcadell and Dolors Bassa — who were pardoned in 2021.

Unit 29155

Following the referendum of 1 October 2017, the Spanish authorities established that agents belonging to a Russian specialist intelligence military group called Unit 29155, which has been linked to attempted coups and assassinations in Europe, were in Catalonia before and during the illegal vote in 2017⁴⁹. Members of the unit were located in Barcelona by the CNI, the Spanish intelligence service, which later transferred the investigation to the National Police.

The CNI and other Spanish security agencies have been calling attention to manoeuvres by Russian espionage to encourage Catalan independence since 2017. The most frequent warnings, according to the newspaper *El Correo*⁵⁰, quoting sources close to the intelligence services, were from the Department of National Security (DSN), the office that has been advising the Prime Minister on risks to the country since 2012. According to *El Correo*, ‘since 2014 the DSN has repeatedly warned in its reports of Russia’s destabilising manoeuvres in Spain, but from 2017 onwards these alerts focused on the Catalan crisis and the “propaganda” and “disinformation” bombing manoeuvres by two of its most powerful international media outlets, the Sputnik news agency and the Russia Today (RT) television network’.

⁴⁹ ‘La Audiencia Nacional investiga los movimientos de espías rusos en Cataluña’, Óscar López-Fonseca and Fernando J Pérez, *El País*. 22/11/2019. Link in Spanish: https://elpais.com/politica/2019/11/20/actualidad/1574276025_237776.html

⁵⁰ ‘Rusia envió a sus espías de élite a Cataluña en momentos claves del “procés”’, Melchor Sáiz-Pardo, *El Correo*. 21/11/2019. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elcorreo.com/politica/policia-investiga-presencia-20191121101519-ntrc.html>

According to a report by the US Congressional research service in November 2021⁵¹:

Unit 29155 is an elite GRU unit that conducts sensitive foreign operations, including assassinations and targeted attacks. Unit 29155 is reportedly connected to Russia's elite Special Operations Forces Command headquarters unit, based in Senezh, outside of Moscow.

In recent years, prosecutors and journalists have linked Unit 29155 to numerous malign activities across Europe. Such activities include Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014; the poisonings of Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev in 2015; a coup attempt in 2016 to overthrow and replace a pro-Western prime minister in Montenegro, potentially to prevent the country from joining NATO; and the poisoning of Russian intelligence defector Sergei Skripal in 2018. In addition, Unit 29155 operatives were traced to Switzerland around the time other GRU units hacked the World Anti-Doping Agency and planned hacks on the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which were investigating state-sponsored doping in sports and Russia's use of chemical weapons, respectively. **Spain also has opened an investigation of travel by known Unit 29155 operative Denis Sergeev to Barcelona in 2017 around the time Catalan separatists organized an illegal referendum on independence**⁵².

⁵¹ 'Russian military intelligence: Background and issues for Congress', Andrew S. Bowen, Congressional Research Service. 15/11/2021. Link: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/intel/R46616.pdf>

⁵² The bold emphasis is the author's.

Indeed, in February 2019, the investigative journalism group Bellingcat published official Russian secret service documentation⁵³ revealing that a Russian military intelligence (GRU) officer called, Denis Sergeev travelled to Barcelona on 5 November 2016 under the alias Sergej Fedotov and, after spending six days in Spain, flew back to Moscow via Zurich. On 29 September 2017, he returned to Catalonia and stayed there until 9 October, after the illegal independence referendum, then returned to Moscow via Geneva.

According to the same source, Sergeev was in the United Kingdom, where he in fact flew in March 2018, during the attempted poisoning of the exiled Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia. The British government accused two members of the GRU, Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov (both assumed names) of carrying out the attack that accidentally killed one of Skripal's neighbours and caused him and his daughter to become seriously ill upon contact with toxic gas.

This elite Russian military group, Unit 29155, was mentioned again in an investigation published in October 2021 by the American newspaper The New York Times on Russian interference in Catalonia, based primarily on a European intelligence report.⁵⁴ The newspaper, quoting intelligence sources in 2020, defines it in this way⁵⁵:

⁵³ 'Third suspect in Skripal poisoning identified as Denis Sergeev, high-ranking GRU officer', Moritz Rakuszitzky, Bellingcat. 14/2/2019. Link: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/02/14/third-suspect-in-skripal-poisoning-identified-as-denis-sergeev-high-ranking-gru-officer/>

⁵⁴ 'Married Kremlin Spies, a Shadowy Mission to Moscow and Unrest in Catalonia', Michael Schwartz and José Bautista, The New York Times. 3/9/2021. Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/world/europe/spain-catalonia-russia.html>

⁵⁵ 'Top secret Russian unit seeks to destabilize Europe, security officials say', Michael Schwartz, The New York Times. 16/11/2020. Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/08/world/europe/unit-29155-russia-gru.html>

Unit 29155, has operated for at least a decade, yet Western officials only recently discovered it. Intelligence officials in four Western countries say it is unclear how often the unit is mobilized and warn that it is impossible to know when and where its operatives will strike. The purpose of Unit 29155, which has not been previously reported, underscores the degree to which the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, is actively fighting the West with his brand of so-called hybrid warfare — a blend of propaganda, hacking attacks and disinformation — as well as open military confrontation.

In Spain, at the request of Court of Investigation number 6 of the National High Court, the National Police began an operation called Volka at the end of October 2019 after anti-terrorist agents confirmed the presence in Barcelona of Sergeev, who is also accused by the Czech Republic of involvement in an explosion at a weapons depot on 16 October 2014 that levelled nearby buildings and killed two people.

Nine months after it was initiated, Miguel Ángel Carballo, state prosecutor at the National High Court, submitted a document requesting that the case be closed. In that document⁵⁶, however, the state prosecution service revealed that the police provided information from an informant with further details about people close to the Catalan independence movement and their alleged links with Russian agents.

According to sources close to the investigation, this informant went so far as to provide the identity of five senior officials at the Russian intelligence services who were allegedly involved in these contacts, as well as details of three foreign financial institutions from which

⁵⁶ 'La Audiencia Nacional archiva la investigación secreta sobre la supuesta trama rusa del proces', Pedro Águeda, El Diario. 17/5/2021. Link in Spanish: https://www.eldiario.es/politica/audiencia-nacional-archiva-investigacion-secreta-supuesta-trama-rusa-proces_1_7935141.html

funds had allegedly been transferred to finance the spies' movements around Europe and credit cards used to cover their travel expenses.

The informant also identified the Catalan businessman Oriol Soler, mentioned earlier in relation to his meetings with Assange in London, as part of this campaign of interference⁵⁷. Soler, subsequently named as a suspect in the proceedings under way at a court in Barcelona for the alleged misapplication of public funds to hold the referendum, is part of what was described as the separatist general staff, a group of people informally linked to the Catalan government who coordinated voting logistics for the 2017 referendum.

On the basis of this information, the police requested judicial authorisation to take various measures, which the prosecution resisted. 'The fact that these are profiles of people closely aligned with pro-independence thinking does not connote that they can be placed under investigation, in particular when the activities are performed openly and via means that are in no way illegal', said Prosecutor Carballo in his document.

In recent months, there have been many such cases of prosecutors appointed or confirmed in their posts by the government in office who object to judicial investigations involving the independence movement and its ties with Russia, as stated in other sections of this report.

⁵⁷ 'La Audiencia Nacional archiva la investigación secreta sobre la supuesta trama rusa del procés', Pedro Águeda, El Diario. 17/5/2021. Link in Spanish: https://www.eldiario.es/politica/audiencia-nacional-archiva-investigacion-secreta-supuesta-trama-rusa-proces_1_7935141.html

Meetings between Catalan leaders and Russian emissaries in Barcelona, 2017

AFTER THE ILLEGAL REFERENDUM WAS HELD ON 1 OCTOBER 2017, WITHOUT THE GUARANTEES required to produce a valid result, the separatist parties in the Parliament of Catalonia proclaimed the establishment of the Catalan Republic as an ‘independent and sovereign, democratic and social state based on the rule of law’, in a resolution that was announced and suspended on 10 October 2017 by the regional president Carles Puigdemont.

On 27 October 2017, the declaration was put to a vote in the Parliament of Catalonia and passed with 70 votes in favour, two blank and ten against, with the 53 members of parliament representing parties that oppose independence having left the chamber before the vote. On the same day, the Spanish government suspended Catalan autonomy and took control of the regional institutions. The Constitutional Court suspended the declaration of independence on 31 October 2017 and ruled that it was unconstitutional on 8 November of the same year, stating that it breached the Spanish Constitution. On 30 October, Puigdemont fled to Belgium and he is now a Member of the European Parliament for Junts per Catalunya - Lliures per Europa.

In the days before the vote on 27 October, a number of Russian citizens with ties to the government of their country held meetings with prominent members of the Catalan regional government, including Puigdemont. These contacts, like others that would continue until 2020 in both Spain and Russia, have come to light thanks to inquiries undertaken by the Civil Guard within the extensive investigation conducted by the judge Joaquín Aguirre, who presides over Court of Investigation number 1 in Barcelona, in proceedings that began as an investigation into possible misuse of public funds which is called the Voloh case, after an ancient Slavic god.

One of the key figures in these contacts is Víctor Terradellas, former secretary of international relations for CDC, Puigdemont's defunct party; his advisor, aide and fixer, and president of the CAT-mon Foundation. According to his statement before the judge, on 20 October 2017 he was contacted by Jordi Sardà Bonvehí — a Catalan businessman, previously the subject of a complaint at the National High Court for posing as a representative of the company Gas Natural in Ukraine to sign a seven-figure contract⁵⁸ — to organise a meeting between some supposed emissaries from Russia and Puigdemont to talk about the economy and cryptocurrencies.

Terradellas had a great deal of power and influence in the CDC party and was in constant contact with Puigdemont. At that time, Sardà was operating with the Russian citizen Sergey Motin, now deceased, who, according to the investigations, presented himself to the Catalan leaders as a 'former Russian general'.

⁵⁸ 'Gas Natural denuncia al impostor que simuló ser representante de la compañía en Ucrania', Agustí Sala, *El Periódico*. 17/12/2012. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/economia/20121217/gas-natural-denuncia-al-impostor-que-simulo-ser-representante-de-la-compania-en-ucrania-2273940>

In the words of Terradellas before the judge⁵⁹:

Some Russian gentlemen, [including] Sergey Motin [they told him he was a general in Russia] and Jordi Sardà [businessman], contact me and ask me to see the president of Catalonia. I act as a messenger, and I tell him: These gentlemen want to see you, do you want to see them? And in this case he says yes.

Offer of funding, payment of debt and cryptocurrency system.

The first meeting took place around 21 October, and it was not attended by Puigdemont, but by a person in whom he had complete confidence, Elsa Artadi, a political leader who was the interdepartmental coordinator of the Catalan regional government under the president. According to Artadi's testimony before the judge in May 2022, Puigdemont sent her because she had a degree in Economics.

The meeting took place at Hotel Colón in Barcelona and lasted about 20 minutes. Artadi met with Terradellas and a Russian citizen, in all probability Motin. Artadi stated before the judge that she did not remember the identity of the people she met, the date, the length of the meeting or what was discussed. The Russians asked Artadi if the regional government had plans regarding cryptocurrencies, an opaque way of moving money that can be used to avoid sanctions⁶⁰.

According to Víctor Terradellas' statement before the judge: 'There was a lot of speculation that cryptocurrency would be a cur-

⁵⁹ 'Víctor Terradellas, before the judge: "Puigdemont did not refuse the offer from the Russians. He just said: 'Keep talking to them"', J G Albalat, *El Periódico de España*. 20/5/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://www.epe.es/es/politica/20220520/victor-terradellas-juez-puigdemont-rusos-13683062>

⁶⁰ 'Puigdemont envió a Elsa Artadi a una reunión sobre criptomonedas antes de declarar la independencia', Jesús Gacía Bueno, *El País*. 31/5/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://elpais.com/espana/catalunya/2022-05-31/puigdemont-envio-a-elsa-artadi-a-una-reunion-sobre-criptomonedas-en-un-hotel-antes-de-la-dui.html>

rency of the future and they said that, if we reached an agreement after the republic was proclaimed, they would like to be able to negotiate a consensus on a law that would regulate cryptocurrencies here'. In her statement before the judge, Artadi said that she did not respond because she did not understand what was being asked of her, although she later took part in another meeting that Puigdemont did attend.

During those months, as Terradellas' intercepted messages reveal, Sardà stated that he was arranging a transfer of bitcoin that the Russians were theoretically willing to provide. Sardà, as the Russians' representative, sent Terradellas a supposed certificate for securities (guarantee) worth 500 billion, which was false⁶¹.

The alleged emissaries from Russia, accompanied by other Russian citizens, later met with Puigdemont and again with Artadi to talk about cryptocurrencies and other matters, according to the investigation conducted by the judge. On the day of the meeting with Puigdemont, Terradellas sent him a WhatsApp message, stating: 'Putin's emissary was coming at 5'. Terradellas returned to the subject later: 'We're at the door to the Palau. You should receive us'. Puigdemont agreed to this: 'Go up to Canonges,' he said in a message.

At a meeting with Puigdemont at his official residence, Casa dels Canonges, the Russians explained their aim: an independent Catalonia with Russian support would become a global hub for cryptocurrencies, which would also allow it to avoid possible European sanctions. In addition, it was mentioned at the meeting that

⁶¹ 'La gran conspiración rusa del "president" de la Generalitat (y los dos emisarios "estafados")', Ángeles Escrivá, El Mundo. 15/5/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elmundo.es/cronica/2022/05/15/6280e9d221efa0550c8b45a7.html>

Russia might even pay Catalonia's debt⁶². According to Tarradellas' statement before the judge, Motin and Sardà wanted to 'reach an agreement on cryptocurrency legislation in exchange for funding the republic'.

Spanish intelligence sources believe that the Russian emissaries wanted an independent Catalonia to grant them exemptions to obtain very cheap electricity to be able to set up cryptocurrency farms, which consume a lot of energy and are expensive to run, in the province of Barcelona. The centre would mine two or three types of cryptocurrencies.

The report by the Democrats in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in 2017 stated⁶³ that Russia's interests in Catalan independence were varied and had a business dimension:

The Kremlin's interests in Catalonia's referendum were likely varied. First, Moscow has recently favored independence and secessionist movements that occur beyond Russia's borders and weaken the EU. For example, before Brexit, Kremlin-linked disinformation campaigns were pro-Scottish independence. But after the UK decided not to be in the EU, and many voters in Scotland indicated a desire to stay in the EU, the Kremlin changed its stance to anti-Scottish independence ... But there were also other, darker motives likely at work. According to Spanish intelligence analysts, Russian companies would look to fill the vacuum created by the exit of Catalan and Spanish companies that left because of instability. In addition, the Kremlin could 'see an independent Catalonia as

⁶² 'El hombre de confianza de Puigdemont viajó a Moscú tras la DUI para reunirse con el emisario ruso', J G Albalat, El Periódico de España, 10/5/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://www.epe.es/es/politica/20220510/victor-tarradellas-hombre-confianza-puigdemont-viajo-moscu-13634187>

⁶³ 'Putin's asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US national security', Democrat group in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. 10/1/2018. Link: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-115SPRT28110/html/CPRT-115SPRT28110.htm>

a possible base from which to penetrate other parts of Europe, where their business activities are restricted by sanctions enforced by the United States and the European Union’.

Offer to send 10,000 Russian soldiers to Catalonia

Later, Motin stated at one of the meetings that Russia would be willing to send 10,000 soldiers to Catalonia. According to Terradellas’ statement before the judge, ‘they propose providing help, among the things they propose are 10,000 Russian soldiers ... and they also propose “ex post funding”, helping to finance the Catalan republic if it becomes a republic’.

The judge asks about Puigdemont’s response, Terradellas replies: ‘He doesn’t say anything, he says that he will continue to monitor the situation, he appreciates the visit, and we’ll talk later’. He did add that it seemed that Puigdemont ‘soiled himself’ when he heard talk of Russian soldiers.

Later, according to Terradellas’ testimony, the Russian emissaries were joined in another meeting by a compatriot, Nicolai Sadovnikov, a veteran Russian diplomat, who was a political planning adviser for the Russian Foreign Ministry. He was identified in 2022 by a joint investigation by Bellingcat; El Periódico (Spain); Irpimedia and Il Fatto Quotidiano (Italy) and iStories (Russia) as an ‘unofficial Moscow intermediary’ for Syria and Iran, who ‘is only accountable to the head of State’, i.e. Putin⁶⁴.

Terradellas says: ‘The day after this meeting another gentleman comes from Moscow, I only know his first name, not his sur-

⁶⁴ ‘Un misterioso exdiplomático ruso se entrevistó con Puigdemont el día antes de la DUF’, J G Albalat, El Periódico. 8/5/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20220508/carles-puigdemont-re-union-emisario-rusia-dui-13609442>

name, he's called Nicolai. And it's more or less the same. There's talk of cryptocurrencies, and again there's talk of the funding they have'. When again asked by the judge about Puigdemont's reply, Terradellas says: 'He didn't say no, all he says is keep talking, and we kept talking to Nicolai'.

Terradellas himself testified that at these meetings there was also talk of a possible videoconference between Puigdemont and Putin, an idea that was later abandoned because of what the Russians saw as a lack of preparation for actual independence. Terradellas says:

When these gentlemen arrived, they proposed a video meeting with Putin. When they saw that no preparations had been made here, none at all ... the funding model for the new Catalan state, the issue of the central bank... They really back off. Nicolai only stays two days because he sees that it was all a joke.

The judge also obtained messages sent between Terradellas and other people, and in one of them, a former advisor to the Catalan government named Xavier Vendrell goes so far as to say that to achieve independence it would be ideal if there were protests in Catalonia with dozens of deaths. This is the transcript of his answers to the judge:

— What are the Russians giving you [in exchange for cryptocurrency legislation]?

— I suppose that the funding for the republic that we had talked about, helping to set up the republic during the first months.

— That doesn't tally with the recordings ... What you say in a conversation with Vendrell is that you had to get a million people into Plaça de Sant Jaume and people had to die, and you offered to be one of them, although later it seems that you had no intention of getting killed.

— No, not that, ever (he laughs) ... I'm sure it was just a figure of speech. Clearly I think that there had to be people in Sant Jaume on the day the republic was proclaimed.

— For what purpose?

— To force the Government to press forward with the process and attain independence.

— Even if people died?

— Well, you never want anyone to die, but, for example, there might have been one or two on 1 October.

The day after the last meeting with the Russians in Barcelona, 27 October 2017, the Catalan parliament passed the unilateral declaration of independence. In 2018, Terradellas travelled to Moscow to meet Sadovnikov again. In 2019 it was revealed that this was not his first trip to Russia.

Offer to recognise Crimea as part of Russia

Terradellas travelled to Moscow several times in 2017 to meet with, among others, an influential former pro-regime Member of Parliament and political scientist with links to the Kremlin, Sergei Markov, an ex-MP for the official United Russia party, who has held a number of important posts in Russian government institutions and councils, as revealed by *El Periódico*, which interviewed him⁶⁵.

As Markov admitted, there was talk at that meeting in Moscow of Catalonia recognising the Russian annexation of Crimea in exchange for Kremlin support for the Catalan unilateral declaration of independence (UDI). Markov told the newspaper: ‘We met three times, accompanied by a Catalan journalist who knows me; he wanted to use me as a contact so I could go to the government bodies’. He adds: ‘They suggested to me that Russia could

⁶⁵ ‘El enlace de Puigdemont ofreció a Rusia reconocer Crimea a cambio de apoyo a la independencia de Catalunya’, Marc Marginedas, Antonio Baquero and J G Albalat, *El Periódico*. 21/11/2019. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20191121/terraddellas-puigdemont-rusia-crimea-dui-catalunya-7741883>

support the independence of Catalonia. And [in exchange] Catalonia could say that Crimea is part of Russia’.

As seen above in this report, from the beginning of the Russian disinformation campaign in Catalonia, as in other political crises, one of the Kremlin’s priorities was to compare separatism in the West with the case of Crimea, to legitimise the annexation and lay the foundations for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

El Periódico revealed that there were three meetings between Terradellas and Markov. Markov added that during those days in 2017 there were unofficial contacts between Moscow and Barcelona, and Russian espionage activity in Catalonia:

I think there must have been contacts of some kind; contacts with the government of Catalonia; if the crisis continued, Russia had to get information about what’s happening, all the details, from both sides ... There were no political contacts between the Kremlin and Puigdemont; but I do think that people were sent from the intelligence services, with technical know-how, who presented themselves as journalists ... one thing for sure, there was nobody who could promise him anything at any point.

Trips to Moscow in 2018

In 2018, Terradellas travelled to Moscow to meet Sadovnikov, the former Russian diplomat who was present at the meetings with Puigdemont. The contacts with Sadovnikov continued for months, until at least May that year, when Terradellas was arrested.⁶⁶

The messages provide a record of Sadovnikov’s contacts with Terradellas. Sardà says in a message on 14 March 2018: ‘Like Nico-

⁶⁶ ‘Detenido el reusense Víctor Terradellas en la Operación Estela’, Diari de Tarragona. 24/5/2018. Link in Spanish: <https://www.diaridetarragona.com/reus/detenido-el-reusense-victor-terradellas-en-la-operacion-estela-20180524-0015-FSDT201805240015>

lai told you, [Putin] is a structure, not a person'. Terradellas replies: 'Yes, just another part of the machinery with all of you in Nicolai's team. [With your help] we'll do what needs doing here... By the way, we're bound to make mistakes and you'll have to be patient'.

On that date, according to the messages, the group arranged the alleged payment in bitcoin. 'Have you made the trans? Tell me what's happening', writes Terradellas.

Indeed, on two occasions, in 2018, they talk about trips to Moscow to meet Sadovnikov. The first time, in January that year, Terradellas asks Sardà: 'Do you want me to go to Moscow with you on Monday?'. The businessman replies: 'Yes, we'll go to Moscow'. The second time Puigdemont's aide talks about going to the Russian capital is on 24 April. He writes to his wife: 'Get the passport ready and I'll pick it up this afternoon. Most likely we're going to Moscow on Friday. ... I'll go and sort out the visas'. He was arrested days later as a result of the investigations by Judge Aguirre.

Conspiracy in the Spanish Penal Code

The meetings in Barcelona involving advisers and aides of Puigdemont, in which he took part, and the subsequent trips to Moscow demonstrate that various pro-independence leaders had the impression that they were dealing with a 'machinery', a Russian power 'structure', in his words, which could promise to set up a financial system with cryptocurrencies, pay the Catalan debt and even send soldiers. At one point, Puigdemont even thought he might have a video conference with Putin.

It can be discerned from the intercepted communications and, indeed, the testimony of several suspects, that there was a proposal to carry out a plan that would ensure independence from Spain with the assistance of foreign powers, in this case Russia. Although the plan was not put into effect, these suspects from the

pro-independence circle went so far as to explore it with people that they believed represented Russian power.

The people most directly involved in devising this plan to attract Russia were from the *Convergència* party, CDC, and its successors, while the other coalition partner in the Catalan Government, *Esquerra Republicana*, remained on the sidelines.

The independence campaigners under investigation believed they were negotiating aid to break the constitutional framework and territorial unity of Spain. And even if the Russian emissaries did not actually represent Putin, the intercepted communications reveal that there was a widespread impression among Puigdemont and his advisers that the Russians that they were taking with were part of the Russian power ‘machinery’, as Sardà and Terradellas said in their messages.

The Spanish Penal Code provides for consummated offences and attempted offences and, under exceptional circumstances, conspiracy and criminal solicitation are also punished. In the case under analysis, an agreement or solicitation to perpetrate the offence existed and, even though it was not committed, the relevant question is the seriousness of the plan and the commitment to put it into effect even if it subsequently proves to be impossible or there is a change of mind or plans.

Article 17 of the Penal Code states⁶⁷:

A conspiracy exists when two or more people collude to commit an offence and decide to perpetrate it. Solicitation exists when the person who has decided to commit an offence incites another person or persons to participate in it. Conspiracy and solicitation to perpetrate a criminal offence shall only be punished in the cases specifically envisaged in the law.

⁶⁷ ‘Organic Law 10/1999 of 23 November 1999 on the Penal Code’, Official State Gazette no. 281. 24/11/1995. Link in Spanish: <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/1995/11/23/10/con>

As will be seen below, nine Catalan political leaders were convicted of sedition, although the Spanish government headed by Pedro Sánchez, which relies on the support of the pro-independence parties in parliament, pardoned them in June 2021. The trial and convictions provided the backdrop for another round of contacts with Russia.

Second round of contacts. Protests in Catalonia and energy deals

The Tsunami Democràtic unrest.

Between October 2017 and July 2018, Judge Pablo Llarena coordinated the investigation into the case against the leaders of the independence process, after which 18 people were charged, including the whole of the government of Catalonia between 2016 and 2017, led by Puigdemont.

The trial of the leaders of the Catalan independence process who did not flee was held as oral proceedings during the first months of 2019 at the Spanish Supreme Court, presided over by Manuel Marchena. At the request of the defendants' defence counsel, the court referred the case of the defendants solely accused of disobedience — Lluís Corominas, Lluís Guinó, Anna Simó, Ramona Barrufet, Joan Josep Nuet and Mireia Boya — back to the High Court of Justice of Catalonia.

On Monday 14 October 2019, a judgment of conviction was handed down against the defendants accused of sedition — Oriol Junqueras, Raul Romeva, Jordi Turull, Dolors Bassa, Carme Forcadell, Joaquim Forn, Josep Rull, Jordi Sanchez and Jordi Cuixart — who were issued sentences ranging from 9 to 13 years in prison. Santi Vila, Merixell Borràs and Carles Mundó were convicted of

disobedience. At the same time, they were all acquitted of the offences of rebellion and forming a criminal organisation.

According to police sources, the pro-independence leaders prepared a protest movement, called Tsunami Democràtic, before the judgment was read, which would cause serious unrest in the streets of Catalonia and other places.

In fact, a pro-independence summit was held in Geneva on 2 September 2019, attended by Puigdemont; his successor as the head of the Catalan regional government, Quim Torra, and other separatist leaders. From there they announced an initiative on their social media accounts, called Tsunami Democràtic, which called for ‘non-violent’ mobilisation in response to the upcoming judgment.⁶⁸

When the judgment against the defendants was announced on 14 October, Tsunami Democràtic used Telegram and Twitter to call on people to protest and thousands went to Barcelona airport, causing over 100 flights to be cancelled. On 11 November, the day after the general election, Tsunami Democràtic switched to organising its followers through its own app, and they cut off the AP-7 motorway at the French border near La Junquera for 30 hours.

New round of trips to Moscow, 2019.

As The New York Times⁶⁹ revealed in September 2021, and Judge Aguirre has investigated, Tsunami Democràtic emerged after a number of visits to Moscow by a close aide of Puigdemont.

⁶⁸ ‘El independentismo no logra una postura común ante la sentencia del procés’, Josep Catà, El País. 2/9/2019. Link in Spanish: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2019/09/02/catalunya/1567449640_333576.html

⁶⁹ ‘Married Kremlin Spies, a Shadowy Mission to Moscow and Unrest in Catalonia’, Michael Schwartz and José Bautista, The New York Times. 3/9/2021. Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/world/europe/spain-catalonia-russia.html>

Josep Lluís Alay was the person who took the initiative in the second round of contacts between the independence movement and Russian emissaries, from 2019 to 2020. He is connected to the circles of power in Catalonia: in June 2018, he was appointed Coordinator of International Policies for the Office of the President in Quim Torra's government, a position he held until 15 July 2018. That day he was appointed chief of staff to Puigdemont, a fugitive from Spanish justice and now an MEP.

According to the investigations conducted by Judge Aguirre, and as *The New York Times* revealed⁷⁰, between 2019 and 2020 Alay travelled to Moscow three times, for meetings organised with the mediation of Alexander Dmitrenko, a Russian businessman based in Barcelona. Dmitrenko was present at all the meetings in Moscow. The US newspaper says:

Whether Mr. Alay knew it or not, many of the officials he met in Moscow are involved in what has become known as the Kremlin's hybrid war against the West. This is a layered strategy involving propaganda and disinformation, covert financing of disruptive political movements, hacking and leaking information (as happened in the 2016 U.S. presidential election) and 'active measures' like assassinations meant to erode the stability of Moscow's adversaries.

In July 2021, the same Spanish government refused Dmitrenko citizenship on the grounds that he was a spy for Russia in Spain. The Ministry of Justice stated that 'there is proven knowledge' that he 'consciously works for the Russian Intelligence Services, from which he receives missions'.⁷¹ Dmitrenko also did

⁷⁰ Idem.

⁷¹ 'El Gobierno deniega la nacionalidad a un ruso a quien acusa de ser espía de Putin en Cataluña', Laura Fàbregas, *Vozpópuli*. 24/7/2021. Link in Spanish: <https://www.vozpopuli.com/espana/gobierno-deniega-nacionalidad-ruso.html>

business with Russian businessman Artyom Lukoyanov, the son of a former adviser to Putin.

The Civil Guard investigation contains many messages between Alay and Puigdemont about Russia's support for independence. In a message sent by Alay to Puigdemont in the summer of 2020, he tells him: 'I'm giving a lot of thought to the Russia issue'.

On several occasions, Alay asks Puigdemont not to comment on critical issues in Russia, such as the repression of the politician Alexei Navalny or the repression in Belarus and the protests against its dictator, Alexander Lukashenko. 'I recommend you say nothing about Navalny for now. Nothing is clear and I think it's better to wait and see if there has been a poisoning or if that's where it's come from,' he says.

Moreover, according to European intelligence reports reviewed by The New York Times, Alay met 'with current Russian officials, former intelligence officers and [Yevgeny Primakov] the well-connected grandson of a K.G.B. spymaster'. Primakov is the grandson of another Yevgeny Primakov, who was in charge of foreign intelligence in the Kremlin and at one point was prime minister of his country. He has been identified by numerous studies as the main ideologue of Putin's foreign policy, an adversary of the US and NATO and the creator of a doctrine in 1996 which explains the recent aggression against Ukraine.⁷²

In 2020, Putin appointed the younger Primakov director of a cultural bureau that European intelligence says is a front for intelligence operations. When he was appointed, Alay wrote to Puigdemont: 'Good news from Moscow'. For example, in messages obtained by the Civil Guard, Alay tells Puigdemont's lawyer, Gonzalo Boye, that Primakov praised him for helping him disseminate an article in

⁷² 'The Primakov (not Gerasimov) doctrine in action', Eugene Rummer, Carnegie Endowment. 5/6/2019. Link: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>

Catalonia decrying ‘how the European establishment ignore the oppression suffered by Russians in the Ukraine’. He adds: ‘Primakov is Putin’s right-hand man in the Kremlin for international relations ... some say he has more power than the foreign minister’.

In Moscow, the Catalan emissaries also met with Oleg V Syromolotov, a former director of counter-intelligence at the FSB, the Russian national intelligence agency, who is now deputy foreign minister, overseeing counter-terrorism.

Moreover, on 17 October 2019, days after Tsunami Democràtic occupied Barcelona airport, Sergei Sumin, a colonel in the Russian Federal Protective Service (FSO), an agency that oversees Putin’s security, flew from Moscow to Barcelona, along with Artyom Lukoyanov, the adopted son of a top Putin adviser, involved in activities for the annexation of Ukraine. According to The Times, Alay and Dmitrenko met with the two Russians during this trip.

The aforementioned investigations reveal that Alay, with Dmitrenko, sought technical and financial assistance from Russia to create banking, energy and telecommunications sectors, independent from those in Spain.

Search for funding and energy deals

The two of them and Puigdemont’s lawyer, Gonzalo Boye, then contacted Russian criminal groups to find ways to finance their activities, according to The Times. Boye, who was sentenced to prison and joint and several civil liability in the 1990s for the kidnapping of the businessman Emiliano Revilla⁷³ by the terrorist group ETA,

⁷³ ‘El oscuro pasado de Boye, condenado por el secuestro de ETA a Emiliano Revilla’, Pablo Gabilondo, El Confidencial. 21/10/2019. Link in Spanish: https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2019-10-21/boye-secuestro-eta-sito-minanco-registro_2292459/

flew to Moscow in February 2020 to meet with Vasily Khristoforov, regarded as a veteran of Russian organised crime.

According to a Civil Guard report produced at the request of Judge Aguirre, Alay and Dmitrenko discussed a business deal consisting of selling oil from a Russian company to a Chinese one through a Catalan intermediary in Hong Kong, which occurred at the same time as a campaign to have Dmitrenko named as ambassador for the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce.

Dmitrenko went so far as to send a text message to congratulate Alay — ‘all of us’, he said — for a payment of \$295,000 made as a guarantee for the sale. The Civil Guard, as their reports reflect, suspect that Artyom Lukoyanov, the adopted son of a Putin adviser mentioned earlier, took part in the operation as a commission agent. Alay also met with Lukoyanov in Barcelona during the protests in 2019.

Other investigations have revealed how Russia used oil to channel money to like-minded parties or politicians. In July 2019, a BuzzFeed investigation⁷⁴ revealed that in Italy, Lega, the populist party led by Matteo Salvini, obtained millions of euros from Russian oil companies to fund its European election campaign and support the growth of pro-Russian parties in Europe. BuzzFeed provided evidence comprising audio recordings of a meeting between at least three Russians and three Italians, including Gianluca Savoini, Salvini’s former spokesman and president of the Lombardy-Russia cultural association.

In an interview with *El Diario*, Alay denied that these business deals and movements of money in exchange for oil were a strategy to enable Russia to finance the independence process. ‘There

⁷⁴ ‘Revealed: The explosive secret recording that shows how Russia tried to funnel millions to the European Trump’, Alberto Nardelli, BuzzFeed.10/7/2019. Link: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/salvini-russia-oil-deal-secret-recording>

was never any intention to create an international framework to finance the *procès*, he said in March 2022.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the judge states in a court order that this may be ‘an irregular transaction’ or ‘illegal funding of a political party’, and should be investigated. However, Prosecutor Fernando Maldonado objected to the investigation, and that part was dismissed.

Reports produced by the Civil Guard also openly state that Alay was involved in creating Tsunami Democràtic. One of these reports, quoted by *El Confidencial*, states that Alay ‘was aware of the campaign — subversive actions — that Tsunami Democràtic intended to carry out in response to the Supreme Court judgment [in the ‘*procès*’ trial] before it was announced on social media’.⁷⁶ Other detainees with contacts in Russia were also arrested in connection with it.

Arrests of individuals involved in Tsunami Democràtic

In October 2020, the Civil Guard arrested a group of businesspeople with close links to the pro-independence parties *Esquerra Republicana* and *Junts per Catalunya*, Puigdemont’s party, for setting up and running the Tsunami Democràtic platform, as well as collaborating in the misapplication of public funds to Belgium to finance the structure established by Puigdemont in that country.

Among those arrested were Xavier Vendrell, a former member of the terrorist group *Terra Lliure* and Catalan Minister of the

⁷⁵ Josep Lluís Alay, jefe de la Oficina de Puigdemont: “Nunca he buscado el apoyo del Kremlin”, Neus Tomàs and Oriol Solé, *El Diario*. 16/3/2022. Link in Spanish: https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/politica/josep-lluis-alay-jefe-oficina-puigdemont-he-buscado-apoyo-kremlin_128_8834075.html

⁷⁶ ‘La Guardia Civil acusa a Alay de conocer de antemano todo lo que hacía Tsunami’, A Fernández and José María Olmo, *El Confidencial*. 4/9/2021. Link in Spanish: https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/cataluna/2021-09-04/guardia-civil-puigdemont-tsunami-antemano_3270514/

Interior in 2006; David Madí, aide to several Catalan presidents, and Oriol Soler, the businessman who, as seen above, visited Julian Assange in London after the 2017 independence referendum. Josep Lluís Alay, who travelled to Moscow on several occasions in 2019 and 2020, was also arrested in the same Civil Guard operation.

The three detainees, Vendrell, Madí and Soler, played a prominent role in the preparation of the 2017 referendum and were part of what was known as the general staff for the independence process, an advisory committee with serving politicians and leaders who prepared the referendum and the declaration of independence.

In addition, according to investigations undertaken by the Civil Guard, Vendrell, Madí and Soler maintained close relationships with Terradellas, Puigdemont's aide who facilitated the meetings in Barcelona in which cryptocurrencies and the possibility of sending Russian soldiers were discussed.

In the order authorising the search of Soler's home, the Civil Guard stated that he was part of 'a disinformation and destabilisation strategy' aligned with the Kremlin 'as part of its overall narrative of an EU on the verge of collapse'.

The aim was to create a major pro-independence and pro-Russia media outlet. 'To do this they wanted to place a high-profile person there and were willing to invest between 100 and 300 million euros or dollars', says the court order previously published by *El Diario*.⁷⁷ In addition, the Civil Guard states that Soler obtained

⁷⁷ 'La Guardia Civil vincula a Oriol Soler con una "estrategia de desinformación" del Kremlin, Assange y Snowden sobre el procés', Oriol Solé, *El Diario*, 28/10/2020. Link in Spanish: https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/guardia-civil-vincula-oriol-soler-estrategia-desinformacion-kremlin-assange-snowden-proces_1_6368478.html

at least three million in subsidies from the Catalan Government for his various projects.

According to El Confidencial, Civil Guard investigations indicate that the members of this network leveraged their positive relationship with the pro-independence parties to obtain irregular contracts and subsidies from the Catalan government.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ 'La Guardia Civil detiene a los empresarios que montaron Tsunami Democràtic', José María Olmo and Antonio Fernández, El Confidencial. 28/10/2020. Link in Spanish: https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-10-28/la-guardia-civil-detiene-empresarios-lideres-tsunami-democratic_2808820/

Response from the Spanish government

Before the motion of no confidence of June 2018.

Intelligence services in Spain, the European Union and the US alerted their respective governments in 2017 about Russian interference in Catalonia. There were commissions of inquiry in the Spanish and UK parliaments, and speeches on the issue in the European Parliament. A report⁷⁹ prepared for the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence dated 10 January 2018 said:

Russia-based criminal organizations have reportedly been active in Catalonia for years, building their influence in politics and business and working to exploit rivalries between regional and national law enforcement entities. There is also mounting evidence that Kremlin-run media outlets such as RT and Sputnik, bolstered by bots and fake social media accounts, carried out a disinformation campaign during Catalonia's independence referendum in October 2016.

Moreover, also in January 2018, the doctor in Political Science Josep Baqués stated in a report by the Spanish Institute for

⁷⁹ 'Putin's asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US national security', Democrat group in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. 10/1/2018. Link: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-115SPRT28110/html/CPRT-115SPRT28110.htm>

Strategic Studies, the Spanish Ministry of Defence's centre for research,⁸⁰ that the Kremlin is capitalising on...

...the Catalan act of defiance to promote instability, using a policy designed to generate confusion through social media, along similar lines to the one used to influence the recent elections in the USA. Moscow has no specific interest in Spain, as it is too far from its sphere of influence. We are not even dependent on Russian natural gas, unlike the situation occurring, more or less overtly, north of the Pyrenees. But Moscow strives to foster discord in Catalonia to weaken a NATO member state. This strategy may be repeated in the future in other European States (very few are monocultural) and it may of course be replicated in our own country (in connection with Catalonia or other similar/potential cases).

In Spain, after the cabinet meeting on Friday 11 November 2017, the spokesman for Mariano Rajoy's government, Íñigo Méndez de Vigo, and the Minister of Defence, María Dolores de Cospedal, announced that they would raise Russian digital interference in the Catalan crisis at the EU Foreign Affairs Council, to be held the following Monday in Brussels.

On 13 November, the Spanish Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Alfonso Dastis, and Defence, De Cospedal, conveyed to their European counterparts at the EU Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels the need to take urgent measures against this type of Russian aggression. The meeting was attended by the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, who confirmed the information on Russian interference in Catalonia obtained by the Alliance through its Strategic Communications Centre. As De Cospedal indicated in a

⁸⁰ 'Análisis de tendencias geopolíticas a escala global', Josep Baqués, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos. 1/2018. Link in Spanish: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_investig/2018/DIEEEINV18-2017_Analisis_Tendencias_Geopoliticas_EscalaGlobal_JosepBaques.pdf

subsequent press conference: ‘They do come from Russian territory and also some others, incidentally, resent from Venezuelan territory. That is what we know as of today’.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfonso Dastis, was asked at the same press conference if he was sure about these operations, to which he replied: ‘Yes, it has been verified’. In the case of online disinformation relating to Catalonia, the Spanish Foreign Minister added that he had asked the Russian authorities for an explanation. ‘This is a mushrooming of false information that serves to exacerbate disinformation and manipulation’, he said, adding that the aim is to weaken efforts to promote a union between countries ‘based on values’.

On 13 December, at a cyber-security conference organised by the National Cryptologic Centre in Madrid, Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría announced the creation of a Security Operations Centre to protect General State Administration computer networks from cyber attacks. Luis Jiménez, head of the Cryptologic Centre, said that the service would have 50 employees, cost 16 million and have a annual budget of two million to act as a permanent ‘cyberspace watchdog’.

That same month, December 2017, the Spanish government fast-tracked the adoption of a new National Security strategy that included greater protection from foreign digital interference. It replaced a previous document adopted in 2013. The Department of National Security, under the authority of the Office of the Prime Minister, introduced changes in the text it had been working on over the previous months to include the growing problem of disinformation. It added⁸¹:

⁸¹ ‘National Security Strategy 2017’, Government of Spain. 12/2017. Link: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/file/2223/download?token=i0IyQa0q>

The use of cyberspace as a means to perpetrate illicit activities, disinformation, propaganda, the financing of terrorism, and organized crime activities, among others, has an impact on national security, heightening complexity and uncertainty, and jeopardizes citizens' privacy.

This was the first time that disinformation was listed among the current threats to the stability of Spain, as it was determined that 'sophisticated high-precision systems are combined with the functional fatality of cyberattacks, influence campaigns and acts of disinformation. Ambiguity and the difficulty of attribution are constant factors of what are known as hybrid conflicts: those that incorporate operations combining information, subversion, economic and financial pressure and military actions. These actions, perpetrated both by State actors and by non-State actors, aim to mobilize public opinion and create political destabilization'.

The strategy, made public in December 2017, does not envisage specific actions, but recommends that the Government 'foster a preventive and anticipatory approach, in which it is particularly crucial to monitor permanently the ever-changing security environment, to have intelligence and information systems, to develop risk analysis methodologies and instruments contributing to protection against disinformation, and to conduct crisis management training and exercises'.

Government sources later told me in 2017 that this addition was a direct response to Russian interference, although the complexity of identifying the government's role in disinformation campaigns ruled out a direct reference to the Kremlin. Russia was cited because of its expansionist ambitions in Ukraine, which brought about 'a deterioration in the security situation in Europe'.

Coalition government backed by pro-independence parties

The Spanish National Security Strategy was updated in 2021 by the new Spanish coalition government, led by the Socialist Party. On this occasion, more detailed information was provided about the significance of disinformation as a strategy to attack Spain and other Western democracies, albeit again without specifically mentioning Russia's role in the campaigns of interference. It stated⁸²:

Due to their potential danger, disinformation strategies by foreign States or non-State actors must be identified, as they develop propaganda apparatuses aimed at polarizing society and undermining trust in institutions.

To protect Spain's interests it is essential to prevent, detect, and neutralize covert attacks from outside Spain, whose objective is to illegally obtain sensitive information to attack Spain's international image or to conduct interference actions.

In addition, tackling disinformation campaigns, which undermine citizens' trust in democratic institutions and lead to social polarization, requires making systematic use of detection, early warnings, and notifications, as well as coordinating the response, always in harmony with the guidelines and the work carried out in the EU.

The new government that took office following a motion of no confidence in June 2018, however, acted as if these warnings did not apply to the case of Catalonia. For the motion of no confidence to succeed and for Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to remain in power following the two elections held in 2019, it was necessary to obtain the votes in parliament of the Catalan pro-independence parties, Puigdemont's PDeCAT and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, in addition to their Basque and Galician pro-independence allies.

⁸² 'National Security Strategy 2017', Government of Spain. 2021. Link: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/file/7272/download?token=miLM79u6>

In November 2018, for example, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the socialist Josep Borrell, received his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Madrid, and they both announced at a press conference that they would create a ‘cyber-security group’ to combat disinformation. ‘Possibly the most important aspect of the meeting’, said Borrell at that time. They both said that they hoped that other countries would join the team, but this cyber-security group was never put into effect.

Later, Lavrov asserted that his aim was ‘to collaborate to make relations more fluid and easier’, adding that ‘nobody has substantiated the accusations or presented evidence’ regarding Russian interference in Catalonia. [Denying interference is a strategy used frequently by Russia, even during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which was preceded by an unprecedented campaign of disinformation and hacking].

Later, in May 2021, Borrell acknowledged that Lavrov warned him during a visit to Moscow that ‘if I mentioned the matter of the opposition activist Navalny, he would bring up Catalonia⁸³’, an indication that it was indeed a priority issue for Russian politicians.

Pardoning the people convicted of sedition and hampering the course of justice.

It is the case that the coalition government has shirked from ensuring accountability for the pro-independence act of defiance in Catalonia. Prime Minister Sánchez pardoned the nine people convicted of sedition in June 2021, arguing that it was ‘the best thing for Catalonia and Spain and the decision most in keeping with the spirit of harmony and coexistence expressed in the Con-

⁸³ ‘Borrell dice que Lavrov le advirtió en su visita a Moscú de que si hablaba de Navalni le sacaría Cataluña’, Europa Press. 13/5/2021. Link in Spanish: <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-borrell-dice-lavrov-le-advirtio-visita-moscu-si-hablaba-navalni-le-sacaria-cataluna-20210513135240.html>

stitution'. All the opposition parties opposed the pardon, regarding which no agreement or collective decision was negotiated.

During the socialist government, the public prosecution service, both in Madrid and Barcelona, has hampered the investigation of cases involving Russian interference in the independence process. For example, the National High Court prosecutor Miguel Ángel Carballo presented a document in 2021 seeking closure of the investigation into the presence of Russian spies in Catalonia during the 2017 referendum.

For his part, the anti-corruption prosecutor Fernando Maldonado has repeatedly objected to extending the scope of the large-scale proceedings being conducted by Judge Aguirre at court number 1 in Barcelona. In April 2020, the judge asked the Civil Guard to investigate the assets of Josep Maria Alay, Puigdemont's chief of staff, who played a prominent role in recent contacts with Moscow, as will be seen below, to determine whether he had acquired wealth illicitly, after finding possible evidence, but Prosecutor Maldonado objected⁸⁴. Previously, in September 2021, Prosecutor Maldonado also objected to the Civil Guard investigating an oil sale transaction between a Chinese firm and a Russian company, a deal mentioned in the conversations in 2020 between Alay and Dmitrenko, the Russian businessman based in Catalonia who was refused Spanish nationality by the Government because he had collaborated with the Russian intelligence services⁸⁵.

⁸⁴ 'El fiscal se opone a que se investigue el patrimonio del jefe de la oficina de Puigdemont', J G Albalat, *El Periódico de España*. 6/5/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://www.epe.es/es/politica/20220506/fiscal-investigacion-patrimonio-jefe-oficina-puigdemont-13620534>

⁸⁵ 'El fiscal se opone a investigar un negocio que el juez vincula con la trama del "procés"', J G Albalat, *El Periódico*. 3/9/2021. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20210903/fiscal-rechaza-investigar-negocio-proces-rusia-12040416>

Judge Aguirre later outlined the evidence against Alay in a court order and described the attitude of the anti-corruption prosecutor as ‘obstructing, rather than contributing to, the investigation of the case’, as ‘all it does is delay’ the proceedings. In addition, according to the order issued by Aguirre, he could have completed the reasoning in favour of the asset investigation with other evidence that already forms part of the proceedings, which the prosecutor omitted.⁸⁶

In May 2021, moreover, a month before those convicted of sedition in Catalonia were pardoned, the government, through the Ministry of the Interior, unexpectedly replaced the head of the judicial police in Catalonia, Civil Guard Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Baena. The lieutenant colonel was in charge of the investigation into the events of the referendum on 1 October 2017, and his inquiries were of crucial importance in bringing to a successful conclusion proceedings that resulted in sentences of between nine and 13 years in prison for the leaders of the independence process. As such, Baena was also the object of a vicious smear and harassment campaign on the part of separatists in Catalonia before he was replaced.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ ‘El juez reprocha que el fiscal obstaculice la investigación del jefe de la oficina de Puigdemont’, J G Albalat, *El Periódico*. 22/5/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://www.epe.es/es/politica/20220522/fiscal-investigacion-jefe-oficina-puigdemont-13691334>

⁸⁷ ‘Interior traslada al jefe de la Guardia Civil que dirigió la investigación del 1-O a segundo de la comandancia de Barcelona’, Rebeca Carranco, *El País*. 18/5/2021. Link in Spanish: <https://elpais.com/espana/catalunya/2021-05-18/interior-traslada-al-jefe-de-la-guardia-civil-que-dirigio-la-investigacion-del-1-o-a-segundo-de-la-comandancia-de-barcelona.html>

Measures by the European authorities

IN RESPONSE TO THE INVASION OF UKRAINE, THE EUROPEAN UNION HAS COORDINATED a series of sanctions against Russia, with the primary aim of limiting its ability to finance the war effort and directly impacting the country's ruling class, but also to dismantle the vast disinformation network that the Kremlin has been constructing for years. Imposing sanctions requires unanimity among EU members.

Some of the 171 Russian companies and public institutions and 1,386 individuals sanctioned as of January 2023 are responsible for financing and running the propaganda networks created or strengthened by the Kremlin, including Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya, and Yevgeniy Prigozhin, who created a network of companies of all kinds, including mercenaries, used to further Putin's expansionist strategy.

In several rounds of sanctions, the EU Council has suspended the broadcasting licenses of media outlets such as RT and Rossiya 1, stating that they 'are under the permanent direct or indirect control of the leadership of the Russian Federation and have been used by latter for its continuous and concerted disinformation and war propaganda

actions, which legitimise Russia's aggression and undermine support for Ukraine⁸⁸. The European authorities have stressed that this ban on Russian media outlets does not entail any limitations on the work of their newsroom staff, who can continue to work within the EU.

The EU's efforts to clamp down on Russian disinformation actually started as early as 2015. That year, the then High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, set up a strategic communications (StratCom) task force to address what she called 'Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns'. Since then the European Parliament has consistently pushed for the unit to be adequately staffed and resourced, thanks to the pressure exerted by the large Christian Democratic and Social Democratic groups.

Today there are three StratCom task forces grouped under the European External Action Service, focusing on European threats in the eastern neighbourhood, the Balkans and the south of the continent. According to various reports, and despite its extremely limited budget and staff, since 2015 the East StratCom group has located and debunked thousands of instances of disinformation spread from Russia on topics as diverse as the Coronavirus pandemic, Jihadism and US military presence in Europe⁸⁹. One of its primary strategies is to dismantle lies and false narratives and expose them on the EUvsDisinfo portal.

⁸⁸ 'Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: EU adopts 9th package of economic and individual sanctions', EU press release, 16/12/2022.

Link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/16/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-adopts-9th-package-of-economic-and-individual-sanctions/>

⁸⁹ Strengthening the EU's resilience to hybrid threats, Sandra Kalniete and Tomass Pildegovi s, Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies, 4/2021 Link: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/17816858211004648>

Special Committee on Disinformation.

In 2020, the European Parliament created the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation, and mandated it to prepare a report with evidence and recommendations to combat this digital interference. On 9 March 2022, days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the Committee adopted a resolution defining and categorising interference in all its forms, including disinformation, manipulation of social media platforms and advertising systems, cyberattacks and threats against and the harassment of journalists, among others.

The approved report, prepared by a team of rapporteurs led by Latvian MEP Sandra Kalniete, concluded that Russia, China and other authoritarian regimes have funnelled more than 300 million into 33 countries, including Spain, to interfere in democratic processes, with support for radical and populist political forces. The report said⁹⁰:

Whereas Russia seeks out contacts to parties, figures and movements in order to use players within the EU institutions to legitimise Russian positions and proxy governments, to lobby for sanctions relief and to mitigate the consequences of international isolation; whereas parties such as the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, the French Rassemblement National and the Italian Lega Nord have signed cooperation agreements with Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party and now face media allegations of being willing to accept political funding from Russia; whereas other European parties such as the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the Hungarian Fidesz and Jobbik, and the Brexit Party in the UK also reportedly have close

⁹⁰ 'Report on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation', Sandra Kalniete, 25/1/2022. Link: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0022_EN.html

contact with the Kremlin, and the AfD and Jobbik have also worked as so-called ‘election observers’ in Kremlin-controlled elections, for example in Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine, to monitor and legitimise Russian-sponsored elections; whereas findings about the close and regular contacts between Russian officials and representatives of a group of Catalan secessionists in Spain, as well as between Russian officials and the largest private donor for the Brexit Vote Leave campaign, require an in-depth investigation, and are part of Russia’s wider strategy to use each and every opportunity to manipulate discourse in order to promote destabilisation...

Among the recommendations adopted, the European Parliament:

Calls, in particular, for the EU and its Member States to boost the resources and means allocated to bodies and organisations across Europe and globally – such as think tanks and fact-checkers – tasked with monitoring and raising awareness of the severity of threats, including disinformation; highlights the crucial role of the EU in a broader strategic sense; calls for the foresight capacity and interoperability of the EU and its Member States to be strengthened to ensure robust preparedness to predict, prevent and mitigate foreign information manipulation and interference, to strengthen the protection of their strategic interests and infrastructure, and to engage in multilateral cooperation and coordination to reach a common understanding of the issue in the relevant international forums; calls on the Foreign Affairs Council to discuss matters of foreign interference on a regular basis

In a new draft report produced at the end of 2022 by the same European Parliament Special Committee, it calls on the European Commission to create a specific sanctions regime on foreign information manipulation and interference, requests that this should also apply to those who provide support for these propaganda networks in third countries and asks the Commission to en-

sure the financial and editorial independence of the media, among other measures. In addition, this report⁹¹:

Reiterates its concerns about the regular revelations of massive Russian funding of political parties and politicians in a number of democratic countries in an attempt to interfere in their domestic processes; expresses its concern about Russia's wide-ranging interference with the separatist movement in Catalonia;

Hearing on 'Russian interference in the EU: the distinct cases of Hungary and Spain'

In October 2022, the Committee held a hearing in Brussels to analyse the cases of Russian interference in Hungary and Spain, focusing in the second part on the case of Catalonia. Among those appearing were the hybrid threat expert Jakub Kalensky, the director of the Institute for Statecraft Nicolás de Pedro and El Periódico's courts and justice specialist, Jesús G Albalat, who elaborated on the contacts between the Russians Sadovnikov and Dmitrenko and mediators for the then regional president Puigdemont.

Albalat said that the media and legal investigations into this case are ongoing and the possible relationship between Russia's hybrid manoeuvres in Catalonia and the actions of Tsunami Democràtic have yet to be analysed⁹². For his part, De Pedro said 'The Catalonia crisis is, or was, attractive to the Kremlin because it had the potential to

⁹¹ 'Draft report on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation', Sandra Kalniete, 14/12/2022. Link: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/ING2-PR-736601_EN.pdf

⁹² 'El Periódico comparece en la Eurocámara en la investigación por la injerencia rusa', Juan José Fernández, El Periódico, 27/10/2022. Link in Spanish: <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20221027/periodico-parlamento-europeo-injerencia-rusa-77772460>

destabilise an important EU member and NATO ally ... Russia tried to exploit the crisis created by the Catalan secessionist movement’.

Following the details offered by the experts, the MEP Javier Zarzalejos took the floor to ‘to confirm the existence of collusion between secessionist groups in Catalonia, including public authorities, and the Russian authorities’. ‘All of this is real, the massive amount of disinformation applied by Russia was and is real, the efforts by media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today to manufacture content and make it go viral were and are real, the meetings, contacts, trips and exchanges between interlocutors who represented Moscow’s instruments of disinformation and interference and the Catalan secessionists were and are real’, he added. ‘Never before has Russian interference reached such a level of intensity and gall as in the crisis caused by the Catalan secessionists ... Russia remains committed to supporting secessionist movements to defend the annexation of Crimea on the basis of a right to decide. Spain is a priority for Russia,’ said Zarzalejos.

For his part, the Spanish Socialist MEP Nacho Sánchez Amor said that the circle of people around Puigdemont opened ‘the door to Putin’s shadowy emissaries, encouraging them to break up a country and a constitutional system and put a hypothetical independent Catalonia in hock’. ‘This was not just some kind of naivety, and it underlines the need to defend democracies, and it underlines the need for Spanish democracy to defend itself through legal means against such a barefaced attack on its sovereignty”, he added. Maite Pagazaurtundua, from Ciudadanos, requested that European research centres be commissioned to undertake a more in-depth analysis of the ties between the Catalan independence movement and Putin’s circle.

