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Russiagate: allegations of Russian interference in the democratic processes of the European Union

European Parliament resolution of 8 February 2024 on Russiagate: allegations of Russian interference in the democratic processes of the European Union (2024/2548(RSP))

(C/2024/6343)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to its decision of 13 September 2023 on amendments to Parliament's Rules of Procedure with a view to strengthening integrity, independence and accountability (¹),
- having regard to its resolution of 13 July 2023 on recommendations for reform of European Parliament's rules on transparency, integrity, accountability and anti-corruption (²),
- having regard to its resolution of 1 June 2023 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (³),
- having regard to its resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (⁴),
- having regard to its previous resolutions on EU-Russia relations, in particular that of 23 November 2022 on recognising the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism (⁵),
- having regard to its resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe (⁶),
- having regard to its resolution of 17 January 2024 on European historical consciousness (⁷),
- having regard to its resolution of 1 March 2022 on the Russian aggression against Ukraine (⁸),
- having regard to the European External Action Service report of 23 January 2024 entitled '2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats – A Framework for Networked Defence',
- having regard to the Commission communication of 12 December 2023 on Defence of Democracy (COM(2023) 0630),
- having regard to the Commission proposal of 12 December 2023 for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing harmonised requirements in the internal market on transparency of interest representation carried out on behalf of third countries and amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937 (COM(2023)0637),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 3 December 2020 on the European democracy action plan (COM(2020)0790),
- having regard to the legal principle of the presumption of innocence,
- having regard to its Rules of Procedure and the Code of Conduct for Members of the European Parliament,

(¹) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2023)0316.

(²) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2023)0292.

(³) OJ C, C/2023/1226, 21.12.2023, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1226/oj>.

(⁴) OJ C 347, 9.9.2022, p. 61.

(⁵) OJ C 167, 11.5.2023, p. 18.

(⁶) OJ C 171, 6.5.2021, p. 25.

(⁷) Texts adopted, P9_TA(2024)0030.

(⁸) OJ C 125, 18.3.2022, p. 2.

- having regard to its resolution of 16 September 2021 on strengthening transparency and integrity in the EU institutions by setting up an independent EU ethics body (¹),
- having regard to Rules 132(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,

- A. whereas foreign interference, information manipulation and disinformation constitute a serious violation of the universal values and principles on which the Union is founded, such as human dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law; whereas trust in Parliament's integrity and the rule of law is paramount for the functioning of European democracy;
- B. whereas there is evidence of Russian interference and manipulation in many democracies, as well as of its practical support for extremist forces and radical-minded entities to promote the destabilisation of the Union;
- C. whereas Parliament's Special Committee on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, including disinformation, exposed in detail the Russian-led efforts and operations to infiltrate, influence and interfere with European democracies and the EU institutions; whereas the European Parliament's response to foreign interference has become more vigilant; whereas, however, more robust measures have yet to be taken and internal reforms must be adopted to ensure effective protection against undue external influence;
- D. whereas Russia is using a wide array of hybrid warfare tactics to achieve its goals, as part of a larger strategy to undermine the proper functioning of European democratic processes; whereas the use of foreign interference and information manipulation, as a means to divide democratic societies, was the precursor of Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine and has increased since then; whereas Russia's spread of disinformation through both traditional media outlets and social media platforms, elite capture, its hacking of election candidates and cyberattacks have risen to an unprecedented level;
- E. whereas the systematic falsification of history has been part of Russia's information warfare for decades;
- F. whereas the Kremlin has been operating an extensive network of agents of influence across the EU, who have affected electoral processes and policies on key strategic issues such as energy infrastructure; whereas these agents of influence actively target all areas of public life, particularly culture, historical remembrance, the media and religious communities, as well as politicians and their families; whereas dozens of investigations have proven links between prominent active or retired European political and public actors and the Kremlin;
- G. whereas funding from outside the EU of political activities and politicians within the European Union before and after 24 February 2022, in particular from Russia, continues to be revealed; whereas this funding poses a risk for the integrity of democratic processes in the EU Member States and requires thorough investigation to hold those complicit accountable; whereas the Kremlin has sponsored and supported a number of far-right and far-left parties and politicians in Europe and, among other things, allowed the party of Marine Le Pen to receive a loan of EUR 9,4 million from a Russian bank in 2013; whereas since then, Le Pen and her party members have on multiple occasions expressed a pro-Kremlin stance;
- H. whereas Russia has established contacts with parties, personalities and movements in order to rely on actors within the Union's institutions in order to legitimise Russian positions, support independence movements and proxy governments and to press for the easing of sanctions and mitigate the consequences of international isolation; whereas MEPs from certain political groups, as well as some non-attached MEPs, have been spreading blatant pro-Kremlin propaganda in Parliament;
- I. whereas there are also 'Russlandversteher' (Russia-understanding) politicians within mainstream political parties; whereas several public figures from EU Member States, including former heads of government and cabinet members, most notably Gerhard Schröder, have held well-paid positions in Kremlin-controlled energy companies; whereas, even after the full-scale aggression against Ukraine, some of these people decided not to step down and continued to receive the Kremlin's blood money, with the silent complicity of their political parties; whereas they continue to use their pro-Russian influence in both their domestic and the European political scenes;
- J. whereas reports by independent media outlets on 29 January 2024 presented concrete evidence asserting that MEP Tatjana Ždanoka may have acted as an informant for the Fifth Service of the Russian Federation's Federal Security Service (FSB) from at least 2004 to 2017;

(¹) OJ C 117, 11.3.2022, p. 159.

K. whereas her actions were described as including political advocacy on behalf of the Russian Federation, through the organisation of events, as well as the provision of information on the inner workings of Parliament; whereas the investigative report suggests that the MEP concerned requested payment at least once from her counterparts to cover the costs of services rendered;

L. whereas these allegations rely, among other things, on what are described as leaked email conversations between the MEP concerned and two case-handlers at the FSB's Fifth Service, dating from 3 October 2005 and onwards;

M. whereas the MEP concerned has been well known for her pro-Russia stance and consistent spread of anti-Latvian and anti-EU narratives throughout her time as an MEP, including her opposition to the existence of Latvia as a sovereign country and her refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine; whereas the MEP is further known to engage in highly problematic political conduct, among other things, through her participation in a referendum observation visit in Russian-occupied Crimea in 2014, a visit to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in 2016 and her participation in pro-Kremlin propaganda TV shows in Moscow; whereas the MEP deliberately gave the impression that these trips were made on behalf of the European Parliament or the EU; whereas the MEP concerned organised and promoted events in the European Parliament with pro-Kremlin representatives from the Donetska and Luhanska regions before their illegal annexation; whereas her activities were allegedly often sponsored by Kremlin-funded front groups, such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation; whereas the MEP concerned, along with other MEPs, organised public events and travelled to Lithuania to demonstrate in support of Algirdas Paleckis, a Lithuanian citizen and former diplomat and politician who was convicted of espionage for Russia;

N. whereas newspaper reports have for a long time highlighted contacts and close personal relationships between secessionists in Catalonia, including authorities of the government of the autonomous community of Catalonia, and the Kremlin; whereas investigative journalists have reported that former Russian diplomat Nikolai Sadovnikov met with the then-separatist leader, now sitting MEP, Carles Puigdemont, in Barcelona on the eve of Catalonia's illegal referendum in October 2017; whereas through its cultivation of contacts and relationships, Russia aims to build political and economic influence to destabilise democracy in the European Union; whereas Court of Instruction Number 1 in Barcelona, which is in charge of the investigation into the Voloh case, which links, among others, the former President of Catalonia and his entourage with Russia, recently extended the investigation for six months; whereas representatives of a group of Catalan secessionists in Spain who have maintained relations with personalities close to the Kremlin, including the MEP concerned, are demanding an amnesty for their alleged crimes;

O. whereas the MEP concerned was excluded from her political group and now sits as a non-affiliated member; whereas the Member concerned gathered support from some other MEPs whose public positions on international issues are similar to hers;

P. whereas in the wake of the revelations, the President of the European Parliament immediately announced the launch of an internal investigation, including a referral to the Advisory Committee on the Conduct of Members; whereas the investigation is currently ongoing; whereas the possible penalties under the Rules of Procedure include forfeiture of the entitlement to the daily subsistence allowance, temporary suspension from participation in all or some of the activities of Parliament and limitations on the right to access confidential or classified information; whereas the Latvian security service announced it will investigate the allegations;

Q. whereas the MEP concerned is not the only Member of the European Parliament to have engaged in activities including taking part in fake electoral observation missions in Russian-occupied territories and fostering confusion with official European Parliament missions; whereas several MEPs were sanctioned for this breach under the Democracy Support and Election Coordination group procedure; whereas these visits took place systematically in Russia and Russian-occupied territories;

R. whereas there have been reported cases of MEPs using Parliament's resources to advocate and promote activities that are directly or indirectly linked to cases of foreign interference, for example in December 2022, when the Belarusian state propaganda channel STV gained access to Parliament's premises and the VoxBox video recording facility inside Parliament and, as a result, Parliament's premises were used by several MEPs to create pro-Kremlin and anti-EU disinformation content;

S. whereas in 2016, Russia's ruling party, Jedinaja Rossija (United Russia), signed a cooperation agreement with the Austrian far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), calling for increased cooperation between the two parties and stronger political and economic ties between Vienna and Moscow; whereas this agreement was signed in the presence of an MEP from the FPÖ, who, since then, has repeatedly called for easing EU sanctions against Russia and disseminated pro-Kremlin disinformation;

- T. whereas the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has uncovered a large-scale disinformation campaign, allegedly orchestrated by Russia, on the platform X, formerly known as Twitter, aimed at manipulating public opinion; whereas reputable German media outlets have exposed the fact that an employee of a member of the German Bundestag belonging to the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party was identified as a contact person for the FSB;
- U. whereas for a number of years, some MEPs have recruited and employed Russian nationals who are supportive of the Putin regime as trainees, accredited parliamentary assistants and group advisers and have not stopped doing so even after the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine; whereas in 2018 and 2019, Elizaveta Peskova, the daughter of Vladimir Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, was working as a trainee with an MEP;
- V. whereas following the Qatargate revelations, in September 2023, Parliament updated and significantly strengthened its internal integrity framework, among other things, through an in-depth revision of its Rules of Procedure, the Code of Conduct for MEPs and the relevant Bureau Decisions;
- W. whereas 2024 is a crucial electoral year and several presidential, national, local and regional elections are due to be held in Member States, in addition to the European elections scheduled on 6-9 June 2024; whereas the 2024 European elections are likely to be a special target for disinformation campaigns at local, regional and EU level;

1. Expresses its complete outrage and grave concern about the continuous efforts by Russia to undermine European democracy; is appalled by credible reports which cast light on Russia's efforts to foment divisions between European citizens by recruiting MEPs as agents of influence, as well as its efforts to systematically create a system of dependencies through European political parties which then act as amplifiers of the Kremlin's propaganda and serve its interests; recalls that, by pursuing a long-term strategy of foreign interference, Russia is trying to undermine and ultimately destroy democracy in Europe; points to Putin's efforts to completely dismantle any form of democracy inside Russia and underlines that this must be a warning sign not to be complacent with Putin's long-term goals and hence to tackle these Russian interference attempts as a matter of extreme gravity; stresses that these tactics must be met with consequences; reiterates its call on the Member States to further develop and fine-tune the sanction packages adopted against the Russian Federation and to close loopholes in the enforcement of the restrictive measures currently in force;

2. Unequivocally condemns the ongoing Russian efforts to abuse and falsify the historical recollection of Europe's most tragic periods, including the consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the terror that followed for the territories conquered by Nazi Germany and communist Russia, in order to try to justify its current brutal, illegal and inhumane aggression and its expansionist policy;

3. Expresses deep concern over reports that MEP Tatjana Ždanoka may have acted as an informant for the FSB's Fifth Service while also serving as a Member of the European Parliament; stresses that an FSB informant having access to benefits and information as a Member of the European Parliament would be a severe threat to our Union's security and democracy; stresses that it is imperative that the European Parliament, as well as the Latvian authorities, investigate this matter thoroughly in order to determine, without delay, the appropriate sanctions and criminal proceedings;

4. Stresses that the MEP concerned has been excluded from her political group for reasons related to her positions on Russia and Ukraine and is now unaffiliated; underlines that the vast majority of MEPs do not share her views and have overwhelmingly condemned Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, its use of hybrid warfare tactics against European democracy and other aggressive and anti-democratic policy choices in recent years; notes, nevertheless, that a small number of MEPs have participated in actions jointly with the MEP concerned, expressing similar viewpoints and siding overtly with Russia;

5. Commits to provide its full support to and cooperation with the Latvian authorities in their investigation into the conduct of the MEP concerned; calls on the competent authorities to investigate whether the MEP concerned is liable for prosecution under national criminal law and remains ready to provide its full support and cooperation therefor;

6. Welcomes the referral of the MEP concerned to the Advisory Committee on the Conduct of Members; commits to enforce its applicable internal sanction framework in full; notes that the alleged facts pre-date the recent adoption of the reform of Parliament's integrity framework; considers that rules by themselves would not have prevented the MEP's alleged reprehensible conduct; remains nevertheless ready to further evaluate and fine-tune the functioning and sanctioning of Parliament's integrity framework, which was strengthened in the wake of Qatargate;

7. Supports the ongoing investigations, but highlights the need to respect due process, the rule of law and fundamental rights; reiterates that political choices cannot be criminalised and that MEPs must not face further restrictions on the expression of their opinions when exercising their legitimate mandate;

8. Points to other cases of MEPs knowingly serving Russia's interests; underlines that the activities of these MEPs are undermining the security, credibility and democratic resilience of the EU; expresses deep concern over the links the MEP concerned may have entertained with other MEPs and firmly denounces any internal coordinated attempts to advance the Kremlin's political agenda within Parliament; considers it imperative to immediately conduct a thorough internal investigation in order to assess all possible cases of foreign interference by Russia and of other kinds of malicious interference in the work of the European Parliament;

9. Expresses particular concern about recent reports that the Russian authorities are providing specific narratives to far-right political parties and actors in different EU countries, most notably in Germany and France, aimed at subverting public support for Ukraine, following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022; stresses the seriousness of Russia's connections with parties and politicians in the Union and its extensive interference in secessionist movements in European territories, such as in Catalonia;

10. Reiterates its outrage about the regular revelations of large-scale Russian funding of political parties, politicians, officials and movements in several democratic countries in an attempt to interfere with and gain leverage in their domestic processes; acknowledges that the overwhelming majority of Member States have full or partial bans on foreign donations to political parties and candidates; expresses its concern about Russia's connections with several political parties and politicians in the EU; recalls that even in cases where the law limits the sources of political funding, Russian actors have found ways to circumvent it and have offered support to their allies by taking out loans with foreign banks (such as in the case of the National Front party in 2016), providing purchase and commercial agreements (such as in the allegations reported by *Der Spiegel* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 17 May 2019 about the FPÖ party and by *Buzzfeed* and *L'Espresso* on 10 July 2019 about Lega per Salvini Premier), and facilitating financial activities (as reported by the British press about the Leave.eu campaign);

11. Is extremely concerned about the alleged relations between Catalan secessionists and the Russian administration; notes that Russian interference in Catalonia, if confirmed, would be part of a broader Russian strategy to promote internal destabilisation and EU disunity; expresses deep concern about the large-scale disinformation campaigns that Russia has pursued in Catalonia, as well as the alleged intense contacts and number of meetings between the agents responsible for Russian interference with the pro-independence movement and the regional government of the autonomous community of Catalonia; calls on the competent judicial authorities to effectively investigate the connections of the MEPs allegedly associated with the Kremlin and Russia's attempts at destabilisation and interference in the EU and its Member States; deplores all attacks on judges investigating any interference activities; calls for the cases of the concerned Catalan MEPs to be referred to the Advisory Committee on the Conduct of Members;

12. Strongly condemns the recent incident in Slovakia, whereby the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, in a provocative move, released a statement during the pre-election moratorium questioning the integrity of the Slovak Republic's electoral process; expresses its concern about the visible and direct role played by Russian diplomacy in Slovak public and political life since the parliamentary elections in September 2023;

13. Strongly condemns the large-scale disinformation campaign exposed by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, purportedly orchestrated by Russia on the platform X, with the intention of manipulating public opinion in Germany;

14. Notes with concern that X has ceased to follow the voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation; is concerned about the widespread disinformation and illegal content on the platform;

15. Reiterates its previous position that the exceptional character of Russian foreign interference requires special efforts by national and EU institutions, including the European Parliament, to identify, address and overcome this specific threat;

16. Strongly condemns the alarming revelation brought to light by reputable German media outlets exposing the fact that an employee affiliated with the AfD party and associated with a member of the German Bundestag was identified as a contact person for the FSB, raising serious concerns about potential foreign influence within the German political landscape;

17. Recalls that foreign interference is a systemic threat that must be countered vigorously; highlights that hybrid warfare and foreign information manipulation and interference are not just foreign policy and security issues, but in fact threaten the very basis of our democracies; urges the EU institutions to adopt a permanent cross-cutting approach to combating foreign information manipulation and interference more effectively; considers that electoral interference in one Member State affects the EU as a whole, insofar as it can have an impact on the composition of the EU institutions; believes that national authorities cannot address these threats by working in isolation, nor can private sector self-regulation solve it all; welcomes the work done by the European External Action Service in its second Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats published on 23 January 2024 and recommends closer cooperation with NATO in this area; remains determined to follow through in its efforts to combat foreign interference in the EU in the years to come, among other things, through a dedicated parliamentary body;

18. Remains steadfast in its support for efforts to improve and enforce the rules that protect the integrity of this institution as a pillar of European democracy; considers that the allegations regarding the MEP concerned underline the need for an enhanced security culture within the European Parliament; calls for the highest level of political and administrative attention to be given to the recommendations for reform of the European Parliament's rules on transparency, integrity, accountability and anti-corruption adopted on 13 July 2023 and calls for the full implementation of the measures proposed, including mandatory and regular security and integrity training for MEPs and staffers, appropriate security clearance and reinforced screening of staffers, in particular those attending in camera meetings; calls for stricter scrutiny of the organisation of events, of the invitation of external guests to Parliament and of access to Parliament's communication platforms; calls on national authorities to follow procedures and a common timeframe whenever they are asked to give security clearance to MEPs and Parliament staff, as well as for any security screening related to the EU institutions; is of the firm opinion that Parliament resources, such as the sponsoring of events and trips, the granting of access to video recording studios and other communication platforms and the financing of political groups' or MEPs' communication projects, must not be used to undermine the values of the EU or for the purposes of disseminating hostile information by authoritarian regimes; reiterates its call for stricter rules for trips taken by MEPs that are paid for by foreign countries and entities; believes that similar rules should be drawn up for trips taken by accredited parliamentary assistants or political group staff;

19. Reiterates its strong commitment to continuing to carry out serious and concrete reforms in the European Parliament in order to show zero tolerance for corruption and corrupting political interference and to protect European democracy;

20. Reiterates its support for the establishment of an independent ethics body as soon as possible, in line with its resolution of 16 September 2021; calls for all EU institutions to raise their ambitions regarding the establishment of this body;

21. Calls on the Secretariat of the EU Transparency Register to ban any entities with direct or indirect relations with the Government of Russia, pursuant to the Council decision of 3 June 2022 concerning restrictive measures ⁽¹⁰⁾;

22. Expects the Commission and the Council to deliver on the Defence of Democracy package in order to urgently take action and close the numerous loopholes in EU party financing legislation, find a compulsory regulatory scheme for the big platforms and step up the EU's cyber defence against possible attacks on our electoral system; urges the EU institutions and the Member States to make significant and lasting investments in strengthening our democratic resilience and the rule of law, including through measures directed at enhancing the EU's counter-intelligence capabilities; underlines that criminal investigations into spying charges are the competence of the Member States; highlights that, in almost all Member States, Russian spy networks have been uncovered; invites the Member States to strengthen their efforts and cooperation, including to neutralise attempts to acquire sensitive technology from EU companies to fuel Russia's military capabilities; welcomes the fact that several EU countries have launched special investigative committees devoted to countering Russian influence;

⁽¹⁰⁾ Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/884 of 3 June 2022 amending Decision 2014/512/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine (OJ L 153, 3.6.2022, p. 128).

23. Condemns all types of elite capture and the technique of co-opting top-level civil servants and former EU politicians, among others, by providing them with lucrative jobs in companies linked to governments actively engaged in interference actions against the EU; calls for MEPs to be banned from performing paid side jobs or activities on behalf of organisations or individuals included in the Transparency Register, or on behalf of non-EU countries, in order to limit potential conflicts of interest and foreign interference;

24. Notes that laws are essential to fight against corruption and criminal behaviour but cannot in themselves prevent criminal and unethical actions by individual MEPs; underlines that all political groups in the European Parliament bear a certain responsibility to monitor the actions of their Members, and therefore reminds all groups to quickly act in the event that they are made aware of any behaviour raising doubts about the integrity of any of their Members; calls on all MEPs and groups to fully cooperate with the relevant national and EU authorities in this context;

25. Believes that free and fair elections are at the heart of the democratic process and therefore urges the EU institutions and Member States to take decisive action to ensure that solely the will of the people serves as the basis of the authority of government, without foreign interference by malign actors, with a particular focus on the preparations for the European elections of 6-9 June 2024; calls for the Member States and EU institutions to implement resilience strategies for the elections and underlines the need to strengthen permanent monitoring efforts and enhance their implementation well ahead of elections, referendums and other important political processes across Europe;

26. Underlines the key role of investigative journalism in revealing the attempts at foreign interference and covert activities; reiterates its call for the EU institutions and the Member States to ensure sufficient and sustainable funding for investigative journalism;

27. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.
