



How NATO Should Respond to Russian Gender-Based Disinformation

O. Wong
CIDP

Claire Mountford
PhD Candidate Queen's University

Megan Barker
Queen's University

Stéfanie von Hlatky
CRC, Professor, Queen's University

Foreign influence campaigns have grown increasingly salient over the last decade and have explicitly been identified as a threat by NATO allies. With primarily Russia and China in mind, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration recognize that disinformation and misinformation have the potential to destabilize societies to the same extent as conventional or cyberattacks. The 2024 NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security also underscores this, raising awareness of gender-based foreign influence campaigns: "state and non-state actors exploit gender narratives and promote gendered disinformation to sow division and destabilize our societies."¹ The policy also identifies technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), violence that reduces women's participation in public, political, and military life, as a growing threat to democratic resilience.² Considering this policy background and focusing on Russian disinformation, we demonstrate empirically how adversaries weaponize norms about gender, sexuality, and sexual violence to achieve foreign policy goals.

Characteristics of Gender-Based Disinformation

NATO defines disinformation as "false or inaccurate information spread deliberately to manipulate the opinions and actions of others."³ Unlike misinformation, which may be unintentional, disinformation is strategic and deliberately deployed to achieve political or geopolitical objectives.⁴ This tactic is a foundation to modern hybrid warfare, which, according to NATO, includes the "use of military and non-military as well as covert and overt means to blur the lines between war and peace and destabilize societies."⁵ These campaigns are difficult to detect, deter, and attribute, making them well-suited for grey zone operations that fall below the threshold of open conflict. Because disinformation tends to "stick" better when it taps into people's identities and beliefs, NATO's strategic competitors use narratives about gender, sexuality, and sexual violence in their influence campaigns.⁶ These tactics are not incidental or symbolic; they are deliberate forms of information warfare that exploit identity to weaken democratic institutions and Alliance cohesion.



The Centre for
International and Defence Policy

138 Union Street, Suite 403. Queen's University,
Kingston, Ontario Canada K7L 3N6

cidp@queensu.ca

Funding for this project was provided by a Targeted Engagement Grant through the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program.



Gender-Based Disinformation and Hybrid Warfare

Gender-based disinformation is increasingly integrated into Russia's hybrid warfare strategies, operating below the threshold of armed conflict to destabilize societies and undermine trust in NATO and its member states. These campaigns target emotional, identity-driven issues to polarize audiences, sow distrust, and weaken international alliances. Below, we identify how disinformation connects to broader hybrid warfare goals.

Undermine Public Support for NATO Membership

Pro-Kremlin outlets spread false narratives about the social and political consequences of joining NATO. An example of such disinformation is the false claim that to join NATO, Georgia and Armenia would have to legalize gay marriage and hold pride parades.⁷ This narrative exploits the fact that, between 2017 and 2022, only two percent of the population in both these countries viewed homosexuality to be "acceptable".⁸ Georgia has officially sought NATO membership, and although Armenia has not, it has participated in NATO's Partnership for Peace program,⁹ and Armenian attitudes toward Moscow have cooled since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war.¹⁰ By spreading disinformation that NATO membership is incompatible with traditional values, these campaigns seek to undermine public support for NATO membership. In response, NATO has directly countered Russian disinformation targeting the Alliance's open-door policy, including false claims that NATO seeks to expand aggressively.¹¹

Undermine Public Support for Deployed Armed Forces

Russia uses ideas about gender, sexuality, and sexual violence to undermine support for its adversaries deployed armed forces. When Canada assumed leadership of NATO's battlegroup in Latvia with a mandate of deterring Russian aggression in the Baltic, a Russian-language news website republished photos of Russell Williams in women's underwear.¹² By bringing up a former air force commander and convicted killer, the article tried to suggest that the Canadian military is filled with homosexuals whom Latvians should not trust. These narratives, grounded in partial truths or entirely false reports, are designed to erode host-nation trust in deployed personnel and reduce public support for NATO missions.

Influence Elections

Russia regularly uses norms about gender, sexuality, and sexual violence to undermine public opinion about candidates in foreign elections.¹³ Before Germany's 2025 federal election, a Russian influence campaign spread deepfake videos featuring "a Nigerian 'escort boy' falsely claiming that Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock was his client."¹⁴ Another deepfake video accused Economy Minister Robert Habeck of sexual assault. By spreading disinformation about sexual violence, Russia was trying to undermine support for the governing coalition party in favour of the challenger, the Alliance for Germany (AfD), which made significant gains during the 2025 election, on a platform that supported restoring Russian energy supplies and ending support for Ukraine.¹⁵ The 2025 German case illustrates how gender-based disinformation remains an active and evolving threat in recent electoral cycles.

Polarize Society

Russia deliberately weaponizes the feminist movement to polarize NATO publics. Using thousands of bots and trolls, Russian influence operations flood social media with

inflammatory content that distorts feminist discourse. For example, one tweet on X linked to Russian actors claimed, “Feminists are more likely to rely on petty insults instead of giving valid arguments”.¹⁶ Others portrayed feminists as “man-hating” ideologues determined to suppress male rights. These misrepresentations are designed not only to inflame tensions between feminists and right-wing or anti-feminist users but also to deepen broader societal cleavages between progressive and conservative worldviews. Russian influence operations also fragment the feminist movement from within. Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) often creates fake social media accounts to co-opt intersectional critiques of the feminist movement, ignoring black feminists, alienating conservative feminists, and neglecting the working class.¹⁷ By attacking feminism from both the outside and inside, Russia seeks to transform women’s rights into a wedge issue, amplify cultural divisions, erode solidarity across political lines, and undermine the democratic cohesion of target societies.

Attack Foreign Critics

Russia uses gender-based disinformation to attack foreign critics of its foreign policy. Female politicians are often portrayed as weak, irrational, or sexual deviants.¹⁸ This includes false claims that both Lithuania’s President, Dalia Grybauskaitė, and Germany’s Chancellor, Angela Merkel, were “alcoholics, lesbians, and former prostitutes”¹⁹ after they criticized the annexation of Crimea. Russia frames male opponents as toxic or effeminate.²⁰ Supporting Putin during the 2008 Russia-Georgian War, the President of South Ossetia remarked that the Georgian President lacked male values.²¹ Activists, journalists, and international organizations are similarly targeted. After the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Putin in 2023, articles erroneously claim that ICC prosecutor Karim Ahmad Khan issued the warrant in exchange for his “pedophile” brother’s early release from prison.²²

Justify Military Aggression

States need to justify their military aggression domestically, maintain public support despite casualties and sanctions,²³ and internationally, secure backing or at least indifference from states that might impose sanctions.²⁴ Russia appeals to the conservative values of its citizens and foreign publics, framing the use of military force to protect the traditional conservative order from the corrupting influence of the “gender” progressive West.²⁵ Ahead of its invasion of Ukraine, Russian media portrayed Ukraine as “a greedy mistress or divorced wife who betrayed its faithful husband (Russia)”,²⁶ claimed it was rewriting gay rights into its history,²⁷ and alleged American biolaboratories were erasing sex and gender differences.²⁸ By spreading false information about the salience of progressive values in Ukraine, Russia can justify its illegal invasion to social conservatives by claiming its actions are designed to save Ukraine from the West’s perverse cultural influence.

NATO Policy Landscape and Recommendations

NATO has significantly expanded its policy framework to confront the challenges of disinformation. At the 2024 Washington Summit, NATO reaffirmed its commitment to building individual and collective tactics to detect and counter disinformation, misinformation, and information manipulation operations.²⁹ This includes enhancing strategic communication, joint alert mechanisms, and information sharing among Allies and strengthening cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific and the European Union.³⁰

These efforts reflect NATO's recognition that disinformation is not just a communication issue, but a strategic threat that directly undermines democratic resilience and Alliance cohesion.³¹ As noted in the Washington Summit Declaration, these activities "could reach the level of an armed attack and could lead the North Atlantic Council to invoke Article 5."³² However, NATO's approach to gendered disinformation remains fragmented. While the 2024 Policy on WPS acknowledges the threat, we offer several recommendations to improve NATO's existing mechanisms to counter hybrid warfare:

1. Gender-based analysis competencies should be developed through training and adapted to online disinformation. While NATO and many of its member states have access to broad gender analysis training, security and defence organizations should incorporate the necessary tools to identify and assess how foreign influence campaigns weaponize norms about gender, sexuality, and sexual violence. This would include detecting gendered narratives, evaluating their impact, and integrating a gendered lens into attribution and response strategies.
2. NATO should develop further policy guidance about the threat posed by gender-based foreign influence operations, tailored to each division. Although the 2022 Strategic Concept identifies Russia as the most significant and direct threat to Allied security and acknowledges the growing impact of disinformation, it does not recognize how NATO's strategic competitors weaponize gender, sexuality, and sexual violence as part of their hybrid warfare strategies. This omission overlooks a core tactic used to polarize member states, undermine public support for the Alliance, discredit foreign critics, influence elections, and justify military aggression.
3. NATO allies should strengthen their Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plans (NAPs) by explicitly addressing gender-based disinformation and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) as hybrid tactics. For example, while Canada's NAP already references disinformation and TFGBV, it primarily frames them as human rights and gender equality issues. This framing overlooks how strategic competitors deliberately weaponize gender norms, sexual violence, and online harassment to advance their foreign policy goals. Embedding WPS focal points and gender expertise into strategic communications, cyber defence, and hybrid threat analysis units could support implementation.
4. NATO and member states should strengthen coordination with civil society and independent media monitors. Women's organizations, digital rights groups, and gender-focused researchers often provide the earliest warnings of coordinated gendered disinformation campaigns. Formalizing partnerships with these actors would allow NATO and national agencies to detect emerging threats better, understand their social impact, and develop inclusive counter-narratives that align with democratic values.

Conclusion

Russian gender-based disinformation is a deliberate form of hybrid warfare that exploits identity, emotion, and societal divisions to achieve strategic objectives. As NATO's strategic adversaries and competitors refine their use of disinformation and technology-facilitated gender-based violence, the Alliance must respond with authority and consistency. While

NATO's recent policy developments, such as the 2024 Policy on Women, Peace and Security, provide a strong foundation to further this institutional commitment, closing the gap between policy and practice requires embedding gender expertise across NATO's strategic communications, intelligence analysis, and threat response architecture. If left unaddressed, gendered disinformation will continue to erode public trust, further silence marginalized voices in political life, and weaken Alliance cohesion from within. Recognizing these tactics as both gendered and strategic threats is essential for defending democratic institutions in the information age.

O. Wong is a researcher at the Centre for International and Defence Policy (CIDP) at Queen's University. He has an MA in political studies and a BA in political studies and economics from Queen's University. He can be reached at I7onwl@queensu.ca.

C Mountford is a PhD candidate In Political Studies at Queen's University focusing on Gender and Politics.

Megan Barker is a researcher at the Centre for International and Defence Policy (CIDP) at Queen's University.

Stéfanie von Hlatky is the Canada Research Chair in Gender, Security, and the Armed Forces and Full Professor in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University. Her research focuses on NATO, gender and the armed forces, military interventions, and defence policy.

Endnotes:

- 1 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security (2024), July 10, 2024, NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227578.htm.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO's Approach to Counter Information Threats," last updated February 3, 2025, NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_219728.htm.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Olivier Schmitt, "When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1448925>.
- 7 6 "To join NATO Georgia will have to legalize gay relationship," EUvsDisinfo, 2019, accessed 21 July 2025, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/stoltenberg-demanded-georgia-to-legalize-gay-relationships-as-an-accession-criteria/>; "Tbilisi, Baku and Yerevan won't join EU and NATO unless they hold LGBT pride," EUvsDisinfo, 2019, accessed 21 July 2025, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/tbilisi-baku-and-yerevan-wont-join-eu-and-nato-until-they-held-lgbt-pride/>; "Preconditions for Georgia in NATO and EU: gay parades and same sex marriage," 2023, accessed 14 April 2024, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/europeans-will-set-as-precondition-for-georgias-nato-and-the/>.
- 8 Christian Haerpfer et al., "World Values Survey: Round Seven – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 6.0.," (Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WWSA Secretariat, 2022).
- 9 "Relations with Georgia," NATO, 2025, accessed 22 July 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm.
- 10 Alexander Atasuntsev, "Long-Standing Ties Between Armenia and Russia Are Fraying Fast," *Carnegie Politika* 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/10/long-standing-ties-between-armenia-and-russia-are-fraying-fast?lang=en>.
- 11 NATO, De-bunking Russian Disinformation on NATO, October 24, 2024, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm>.
- 12 Chris Brown, "Anti-Canada propaganda greets troops in Latvia," *CBC News* 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/latvia-propaganda-1.4162612>.
- 13 Owen Wong, "How Russian gender-based disinformation could influence the 2024 U.S. presidential election," *The Conversation* 2024, <https://theconversation.com/how-russian-gender-based-disinformation-could-influence-the-2024-u-s-presidential-election-236473>.
- 14 Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, "Russia's Attack on German Elections: The Role of AI," *Ukraine Crisis Media Center* 2025, <https://uacrisis.org/en/rosijska-ataka-na-vybory-v-nimechchyni-rol-shtuchnogo-intelektu>.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Bradshaw and Henle, "The Gender Dimensions of Foreign Influence Operations," 4604.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Woojeong Jang, "Women against Putin: gendered security threats and female leaders," *European Journal of International Relations* 0, no. 0 (2025): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661251329293>.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 23.
- 21 Valerie Sperling, "Putin's macho personality cult," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 16, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.001>.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Erik Voeten, "The Political Origins of the UN Security Council's Ability to Legitimize the Use of Force," *International Organization* 59, no. 3 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050198>.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Emil Edenborg, "Disinformation and gendered boundarymaking: Nordic media audiences making sense of 'Swedish decline'," *Cooperation and Conflict* 57, no. 4 (2022): 117.
- 26 Jang, "Women against Putin: gendered security threats and female leaders," 10.

- 27 “Ukrainian authorities substitute values and falsify history with the help of LGBT flag,” EUvsDisinfo, 2020, accessed 22 July 2025, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/ukrainian-authorities-substitute-values-and-falsify-history-with-the-help-of-lgbt-flag/>.
- 28 “The US is developing biological weapons in biolaboratories near the Russian borders,” EUvsDisinfo, 2021, accessed 13 May 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-us-is-developing-biological-weapons-in-biolaboratories-near-the-russian-borders/>.
- 29 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Washington Summit Declaration.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO’s Approach to Counter Information Threats.”
- 32 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Washington Summit Declaration.