Russian Malign Influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus: Recommendations for U.S. Government Strategy in the Post-Ukraine Invasion Context

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List of Acronyms

CMKI	Countering Malign Kremlin Influence
DoD	Department of Defense
DoS	Department of State
EU	European Union
ICS	Integrated Country Strategy
JRS	Joint Regional Strategy
JSP	Joint Strategic Plan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
RIG	Russia Influence Group
RT	Russia Today
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government

Executive Summary

The purpose of this exploratory research is to provide an understanding of the perceived threats of Russian malign influence and current approaches to responding to those threats by the United States Government in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. It aims to promote a discussion concerning the perceived specifics of the Russian malign influence threat and how the U.S. Government should be organizing and systematically approaching this threat. The research presented is not exhaustive; rather, the aim is to provide a starting point for further discussion and exploration. This study's findings were distilled from semi-structured interviews with government and non-government experts from the DoD, DoS, USAID, and several private sector organizations, as well as through an analysis of publicly available U.S. Government strategy documents from the DoS and USAID.

This research has identified five findings through its gap and pattern analyses:

> **Finding 1:** The four primary threats to the U.S. Government interests posed by Russian malign influence are (1) the undermining of American and Western influence in the region, (2) destabilization and fracturing of domestic governments, (3) the pushing of target countries toward authoritarianism, and (4) breaking of linkages with the United States and other Western states in these domestic political contexts.

> **Finding 2:** The four key mechanisms employed by the Russian government to manifest these threats are (1) muddying media and the information space with disinformation and propaganda, (2) leveraging dependency of regional governments on Russian energy, economy, and military assistance to coerce foreign policy concessions, (3) destabilizing societies through cyber attacks and appeals to Religious Orthodoxy, and (4) utilizing domestic political levers such as corrupt and loyal politicians, local institutions, extremist parties, and secessionist movements.

> **Finding 3:** The three buckets encompassing the U.S. Government's response to Russian malign threats are (1) bolstering local stakeholder resiliency, (2) providing direct counter efforts, and (3) increasing partner transparency and openness.

> **Finding 4:** Five confounding factors, local to individual domestic contexts, can strengthen or weaken either Russian malign influence or the U.S. Government's response to it: (1) local stakeholder buy-in, (2) Russian cultural and linguistic ties, (3) freedom of expression, (4) corruption, and (5) external crises and events.

> **Finding 5:** U.S. Government strategy becomes increasingly localized as it moves from the agency to country level, yet there is no overarching strategy or organizing principle to

guide a whole-of-government operationalization of agency, bureau, and country strategies.

Additionally, the research team proposes four recommendations for the U.S. Government derived from the practitioner interviews and primary source analysis:

Recommendation 1: Operationalize a whole-of-government response for countering Russian malign influence that guides agency goals and interagency coordination.

Recommendation 2: Take a more creative approach to information, to make more engaging materials to supplement media literacy education.

Recommendation 3: Promote more equitable partnerships and exercising relations with humility – a principle that should not only be practiced in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, but also in other regions such as Africa.

Recommendation 4: Use nuanced language in messaging that promotes the benefits of U.S. partnership while highlighting Moscow's historical and contemporary abuses.

In the context of these findings and recommendations, the research team emphasizes three salient takeaways from the report:

Takeaway 1: This exploratory research provides a framework for examining and interrelating threats of Russian malign influence, the mechanisms that realize them, and current U.S. Government avenues of response.

Takeaway 2: Regarding organizing principles for the U.S. Government related to Russian malign influence, threat perception and strategy for response are fairly well developed but there are opportunities to expand how this strategy is manifested and operationalized.

Takeaway 3: There remains opportunity for U.S. Government efforts throughout this geography to implement a more localized, deliberate, coordinated response.

This research provides an initial examination of the perceived threats and mechanisms that realize malign Russian influence, and the current avenues of response employed by the U.S. Government in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. To this conversation, it contributes a synthesis of these threats, mechanisms, responses, and confounding factors that has not previously existed in such a conceptualized form in the public space.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Purpose & Significance
The purpose of this exploratory research is to provide an understanding of the perceived threats and current approach to responding to those threats of malign Russian influence by the United States government in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, relying on expert insights from government and non-government actors to inform recommendations for how the USG can more effectively counter this threat in these regions. This study aims to stimulate a discussion concerning the perceived specifics of the Russian malign influence threat and how the USG should be organizing and systematically approaching this threat. The research presented is not exhaustive; rather, the aim is to provide a starting point for further discussion and exploration. The study specifically focuses on the following countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus: Albania, Moldova, Belarus, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Of note is the fact that Ukraine was excluded from this study's inclusion criteria. As a state of war exists between Ukraine and Russia, Russia currently operates in a significantly different context than it does in the other listed countries. The invasion has drastically altered the calculus of USG strategy for countering Russian actions in Ukraine. Additionally, much of the USG's attention has understandably shifted to the war in Ukraine, perhaps resulting in less attention being paid to other regional actors such as the aforementioned countries.

An examination of the extant literature reveals a primary focus on how Russia extends and enhances its influence, but does not significantly discuss actionable approaches to counter malign influence. Moreover, much of this literature was either published before the Russian invasion of Ukraine or focuses on a pre-invasion context within our regions of interest. This leaves a significant gap in the body of literature regarding the response of the USG to these malign activities throughout the region, particularly after February 24th, 2022. To begin the process of filling this gap, this study was conducted to identify patterns of Russian malign influence in these target countries, in addition to patterns of USG threat perception and response, and obstacles for the USG to overcome regarding its regional efforts. More specifically, the study sought to answer the following research question: "How has Russia's build-up to its invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022 affected the USG's response to Russian malign influence threats in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus? Embedded in this question is the intent to understand the current gaps in the USG response, and how can these be addressed to increase the effectiveness of USG efforts in these regions?"

This research is significant because it provides a macro level view of how the USG defines, organizes, and responds to the threat of Russian malign influence. More research is needed on the topic, but this first examination provides valuable insights for policy makers and policy implementers. Additionally, it relies exclusively on primary sources for its analysis and recommendations. Beyond a review of publicly available USG strategy documents, the research

team invited insights and recommendations from government and non-government experts to understand how the USG can more effectively promote its interests and counter Russian malign influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus moving forward, particularly in the new post-Ukraine invasion context.

Why "Malign" Influence?"

This study defines Russian malign influence as follows: "Activities, both legal and illegal, undertaken by the Russian government and pro-Russian non-state actors with the intention of advancing Russian government interests at the expense of those of other states." "Malign" is especially used to characterize actions that the USG perceives as expressly dishonest in nature: disinforming, destabilizing, exerting undue pressure, etc.

Malign influence differs from simple influence as the former implies a scale of coordinated operations with the specific aim of undermining western interests, including those of the United States, through disinformation, destabilization, or pressure. Many instances of Russian influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus can be considered benign, not acting to undermine USG interests—even if U.S. interests are not advanced. However, a significant amount of Russian regional influence is wielded with the intention of undermining the United States, its Western allies, and the target countries that are directly impacted by these activities. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has recently said that one of its strategic aims in Ukraine is the formation of a "new world order," rejecting unipolar American hegemony—and while Ukraine is not one of this research's focuses, such philosophy undoubtedly informs Russia's strategy across the whole of these regions. For that reason, this study defines Russian malign influence as it does to intentionally focus its analysis and recommendations on this threatening subset of Russian influence while also acknowledging that not all Russian influence is negative or harmful to USG interests.

Why Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus?

Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus are regions that are especially exposed to Russian influence for a variety of reasons: Russia is geographically proximate; its leadership has publicly intoned that territories of its former Soviet sphere of influence should still constitute Russian or Russian-aligned land; states across these regions are typically host to Russian-speaking minority groups; and Russian institutions and corporations continue to permeate societies throughout these regions. Additionally, while many such states have expressed interest in joining the European Union and/or NATO (of our subject geography, only Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are current NATO members), they lack a strong tradition of democratic governance and classically Western liberal values. This exacerbates susceptibility to Russian influence, especially pertaining to the cultural sphere: local nationalist movements across these regions parrot Russia as a bulwark of traditional conservatism, family values, and Orthodoxy—even in countries nominally at odds with it, like Georgia. This thread, combined with the context of

Europe's burgeoning grapple with populism, adversely affects nascent republics' ability to govern, maintain societal cohesion, and bolster domestic institutions. Russia takes advantage of this confusion by mobilizing local Russian-speaking populations and polluting information spaces with extreme quantities of disinformation,which aims to raise general public distrust/uncertainty towards all media.

Ethnicity is central to this geography and is almost always a significant driver of interstate conflict within it, with ramifications for the status of democratic processes and institutions. For example, the continuing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is central to maintaining Armenian dependence on Russia: the existence of the Collective Security Treaty Organization serves as an ostensible bulwark in protecting Armenian sovereignty, furthering the reliance Yerevan has for Moscow. The complexity of these regions' ethnic dimension demands a nuanced approach on behalf of the USG and contributes to the need for additional research.

The U.S. Agency for International Development's Countering Malign Kremlin Influence (CMKI) development framework influenced our country selection within these regions. The framework highlights the most relevant countries in the region currently subject to Russian influence efforts and key focus areas currently guiding USG programming against them: Protecting Democratic Institutions & the Rule of Law, Resisting Manipulation of the Information Environment, Reducing Energy Sector Vulnerabilities, and Reducing Economic Vulnerabilities. It also addresses the issue of implementation now and in the near future, as "the challenge of malign influence from the Kremlin and beyond is unlikely to abate over the near term." Considering these aspects, the CMKI appears to be the most cohesive and chronologically relevant USG strategy guiding policy in this geography, and is thus appropriate for influencing country selection.

2. FINDINGS

The research identified five findings related to how the USG sees the macro level threat in the region, the types of mechanisms understood to be used by Russia to realize the threats, the responses from the USG towards these threats and mechanisms, and confounding factors that potentially strengthen or weaken USG and Russian activities. Further, these findings highlight potential gaps in the structure and response to these threats by the USG. Below, Figure 1 visualizes each of these findings and illustrates the relationships between malign threats, mechanisms, confounding factors, and USG responses.

Figure 1: Malign Threats Map
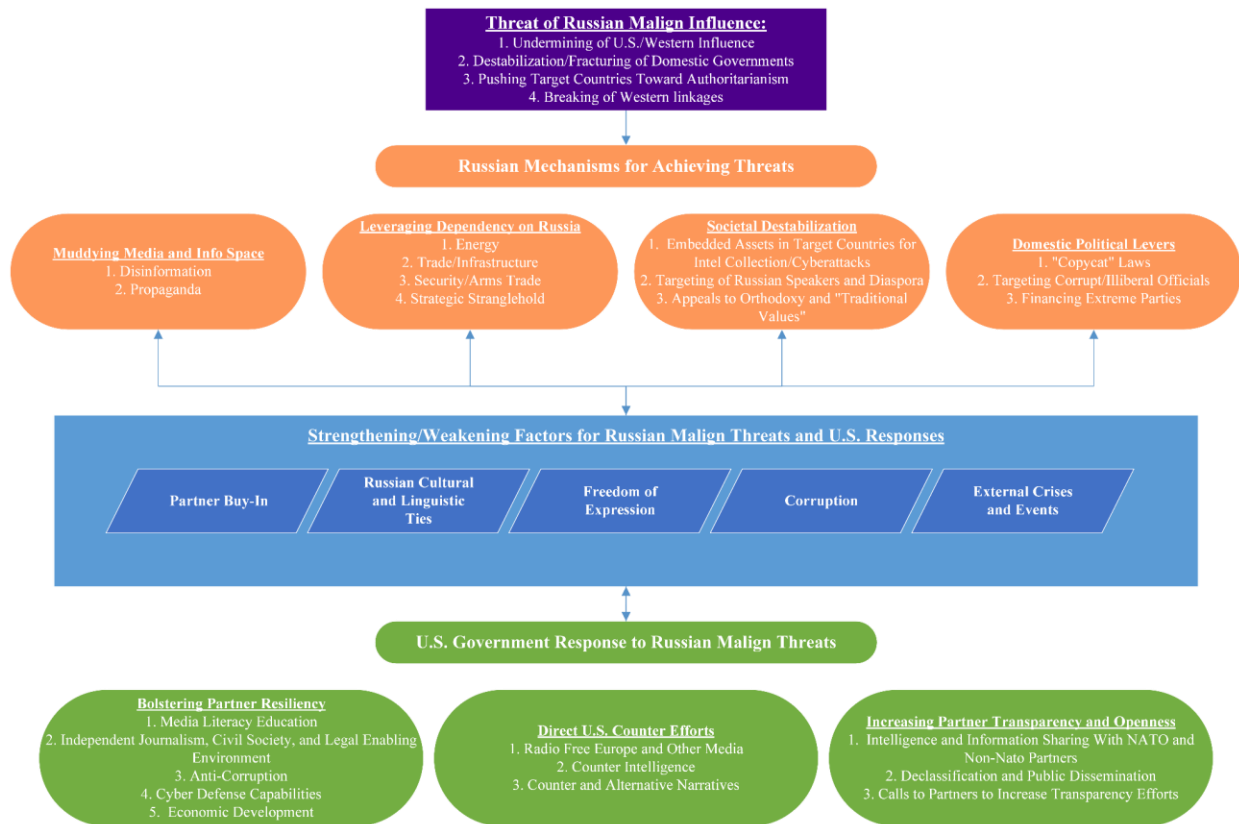
1. Threat of Russian Malign Influence is Focused on Undermining Western Influence, Destabilizing Domestic Governments, Encouraging Authoritarianism, and Breaking Western Linkages

The practitioner interviews conducted for this project illustrate the malign threat perception regarding U.S. security interests, but these insights are best understood in the context of the following definition of Russian malign influence: activities, both legal and illegal, undertaken by the Russian government and pro-Russian non-state actors (whether formally affiliated with the Russian state or not) with the intention of advancing Russian government interests at the expense of those of other states. Throughout the interview process, participants identified several threat types with contextually specific examples that provide a clear threat perception that fits within the scope of the provided definition of Russian malign influence. While there was no concrete, mutually held definition of "malign influence" that was discernible to the research team, we did find that tangible threats were similarly recognized and identified across government agencies, as well as across government and non-government spaces. In addition to these threats, the

practitioner interviews also identified several mechanisms by which the Russian government seeks to achieve its malign influence goals.

Across the interviews conducted for this project, the research team identified four general threats to USG interests posed by Russian malign influence activities in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (displayed in the purple box within Figure 1). Important to note is that there is no explicit threat identification in any of the publicly available strategy documents the research team analyzed. Through our analysis, however, we identified four primary threat types that appeared across strategy documents and the interviews, defining the four macro level threats discussed in this section. The first of these threats is the undermining of American and Western influence in the region. By undermining the influence wielded by the West and the USG through institutions, norms, and bilateral relations, the Russian government seeks to further entrench its traditional sphere of influence and weaken democratic linkages between government, technology, and civil society that are essential for a comprehensive anti-influence campaign. The second is the destabilization and fracturing of domestic governments. Fomenting social disunity and intragovernmental tensions disrupts domestic political contexts, decreasing trust in domestic systems and institutions while derailing efforts to pursue closer integration with the West. Meanwhile, the deterioration of domestic environments by virtue of this destabilization provides the opportunity for spillover into member states, inhibiting local capabilities to both combat Russian influence and disseminate pro-Western narratives. The third is the pushing of target country governments toward authoritarianism and away from democracy. Encouraging democratic backsliding undermines the democratization and development goals of the USG in the region, straining relations with the West while directly reducing the strength of multilateral coordination and collaboration, particularly related to building resiliency to malign influence activities. The fourth and final threat is the breaking of linkages with the United States and other Western states in these domestic political contexts. Several states included in this study have joined NATO, and many wish to seek membership in both NATO and the EU, actions which will create a schism between these countries and Russia. To prevent a retrenchment of Russia's sphere of influence, breaking linkages - or desires for linkages - between these states and the West is a means of self-preservation for the Kremlin. Of equal importance to these general threats are the mechanisms by which the Russian government brings such threats and goals to fruition, which will be discussed in the following section.

2. Russia Employs Four Key Mechanisms for Achieving Malign Influence, Including Muddying Media and Information Space, Leveraging Dependency on Russia, Societal Destabilization, and Domestic Political Levers

Figure 2: Russian Mechanisms for Achieving Threats

These mechanisms (displayed in Figure 2 and taken from the orange section of Figure 1) provide Russia the opportunities to manifest the aforementioned macro-level threats on the ground. They can work in combination with each other, especially muddying the information space in concert with destabilization efforts: in North Macedonia, for example, ethnic Macedonians typically obtain media packages from Serbia. Serbia serves as a proxy for Russian influence in the Balkans, and their common Yugoslav legacy further plays up pro-Russian narratives. At the same time, North Macedonian attitudes towards the EU are deteriorating due to its perceived bias in favor of regional rivals, like Bulgaria. Thus, a variety of factors contemporarily advance North Macedonian susceptibility to Russian influence.

Muddying Media and Info Space: The most prominent of these mechanisms, based on the frequency at which it was mentioned and the significance that was attributed to it by the interview respondents, is disinformation and media. Respondents overwhelmingly stated the leading role that disinformation and the media play in Russia's malign influence activities. Using an assortment of state and privately-owned media, individuals and trolls, and algorithms to bombard the information space to "muddy the waters," the goal of these information and media tactics is to disorient, disillusion, and destabilize local populations. As a result, there is great potential for the erosion of trust in institutions, officials, and media, as well as inflamed social tensions, and overall disruption of an organic information space. Three other significant mechanisms were identified by our respondents during the interviews.

Leveraging Dependency on Russia: Fostering and leveraging dependency on Russia is the second mechanism of interest, occurring across sectors of energy, trade, security, and arms sales. Utilizing this mechanism allows for strategic strangleholds to be created where the Russian government can manipulate heavy reliance on it for economic opportunities, energy supply, security guarantees, or the acquisition of military technologies and weapons to force policy concessions from dependent states that stray from policies that benefit the Kremlin. Russia's leveraging of its oil and natural gas supplies throughout the region has been a leading component of this mechanism, manifesting as supply cutoffs to dependent states when Kremlin and target country foreign policies are at odds. In turn, energy is leveraged to force policy concessions to realign policies that benefit Russia's interests. Additionally, our interviews also illustrated examples such as Serbia where the government's policies are already closely aligned with Russia's interests and have facilitated a more favorable energy relationship between the two

countries for Serbia. Moldova is also an interesting case as Russia's leveraging of energy within the country occurs in conjunction with other efforts to foment separatism and destabilize the breakaway region of Transnistria. Since December 2022, Gazprom has cut off supply of all oil and natural gas to the country of Moldova, except to Transnistria, as Moldova has shown a greater affinity for Western countries and institutions in recent years.

Societal Destabilization: The third mechanism is societal destabilization. This destabilization takes several forms, with one of the most adverse and overt being cyberattacks. Through ransomware, denial of service operations, and energy grid disruption, hard power cyber capabilities are used to undermine domestic infrastructure, as well as political and economic institutions and resources. Enhancing the scale and effectiveness of these cyberattacks is the growing trend of the Kremlin embedding assets in all levels of domestic governments in the region related to economic systems, telecommunications, and infrastructure. While cyberattacks present an overt avenue for disrupting everyday lives and sowing disarray, more soft-power approaches to societal destabilization heavily appeal to Orthodoxy and so-called "traditional values." These appeals to a shared religious identity and traditional values are a means of driving a social and cultural wedge between local populations and the West. Liberal-democratic values are often attacked as being antithetical to a shared regional sense of orthodoxy, particularly in narratives claiming an imposition of these norms on unconsenting local populations by countries like the United States.

Domestic Political Levers: The fourth and final mechanism is Russia's leveraging of local political contexts and institutions. "Copycat" laws are one means of doing this through domestic policy avenues, with Georgia's Foreign Agents law being one of the clearest examples of this concept. The Foreign Agents law closely mirrors a similar law in Russia requiring certain civil society organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources to register as foreign agents. Beyond the creation of tangible bills and policies, the Russian government has also targeted corrupt and sympathetic officials in domestic governments to parrot Russian narratives and disinformation, sometimes leading to support of such legislation. Additionally, Russian financial resources and media are used to support extremist parties that increase tensions within domestic contexts, propping such parties up to gain larger shares of government seats while also pushing information to skep public perceptions of the government and increase support for such parties and candidates. One such example is the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, is pro-Russian and a devout Serb nationalist that has called for Bosnian-Serb independence on several occasions and receives support from the far-right, ultranationalist, and Russian-trained and funded paramilitary group Serbian Honor. Additional support for Bosnian-Serb independence in Republika Srpska comes from local Bosnian members of the Night Wolves Russian biker gang that receive significant funding from the Kremlin and routinely carry out public demonstrations in Sarajevo and throughout Republika Srpska.

3. U.S. Government Response to Russian Malign Threats Focuses on Three Broad Approaches Including Bolstering Local Stakeholder Resiliency, Providing Direct Counter Efforts, and Increasing Partner Transparency and Openness

Figure 3: USG Response to Russian Malign Threats

Within the context of these threats and mechanisms, the practitioner interviews also illustrated the nature of the USG response to Russian malign threats. Through our analysis, the research team identified three primary categories of response with subsidiary programming and methods for execution: capacity building to increase partner resiliency to malign threats, direct USG efforts to counter Russian information operations, and advocacy efforts among allies and regional partners to increase transparency and openness (displayed Figure 3 and taken from the green section of Figure 1). Each of these categories contribute to the holistic USG response to Russian malign influence, though do not constitute the entire response, rather these are the responses identified by the team through the practitioner interviews. In each of the categories are subsidiary responses that contribute to the efficacy of the overarching framework for each response category.

Bolstering Partner Resiliency: Capacity building occurs in several ways, all with the goal of promoting self-reliance among partner countries related to resisting Russian malign efforts. Localization has been foundational to the approach of agencies like USAID, relying on an understanding of local contexts within each partner country to increase the efficacy of programming to insulate partners from destabilization. In 2020, USAID and Georgia announced the Georgia Information Integrity Program, which explicitly entails supporting "a network of domestic organizations who actively combat disinformation." It elevates the principle that effective anti-disinformation efforts must actively build Coupled with this emphasis on localization is the funding of locally-run programs and institutions and sometimes intermediaries, ensuring that the programs are associated with local leaders and practitioners first as opposed to direct, top-down USG programming. Promoting media literacy has been one example of this, with the USG supporting educational media literacy programming for local citizens that is contextually relevant. Beyond citizen media literacy programming, the USG has also supported —and tried to emulate—cybersecurity education and fellowship programs that provide associates-level training to students in exchange for a designated number of years of government service upon graduation.

A final component of the USG response for capacity building worth noting is support for the development of independent journalism and civil society. Such capacity building for independent journalism has occurred through support for journalistic exchanges and workshops among local media outlets, focusing on the creation of engaging, relevant content and sustainable business practices. Direct diplomatic engagement with domestic governments has also been important in supporting a legal-enabling environment that is conducive to advocacy and freedom of expression among journalists and citizens. This legal-enabling environment has also been important for civil society organizations, with additional capacity building efforts focusing on training civil society organizations to be self-sufficient in promoting indigenous fundraising and facilitating interorganizational participation. Ultimately, these journalistic and civil society efforts seek to increase the capacity to expose corruption and disinformation while providing essential services to citizens. Recent funding opportunities available through the Democracy Commission Small Grants Program and advertised by the U.S. Embassy in Moldova illustrates the nature of such capacity building efforts, such as the MediaCor program run as a joint effort between the USAID-funded American Pavilion and the Moldovan State University to build media literacy and promote citizen journalism within the country.

Direct U.S. Counter Efforts: Direct USG response to Russian malign influence activities has primarily been focused on its disinformation efforts, focused on countering the manipulation of media, information, and public discourse, in a dual-pronged approach. The specific types of disinformation USAID focuses on are fabricated, manipulated, and misleading content produced by the Kremlin.The first prong directly counters false and misleading narratives while the second provides alternative narratives to those presented, often pro-American and pro-Western in nature. Such dissemination of information occurs through a number of sources. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is one prominent example that presents both of these narrative types: while ostensibly independent, it is funded directly by the USG and serves as a media outlet that local populations can engage with directly. Beyond this example, U.S. embassies and consulates in partner countries also play an important role in disseminating this information, especially when in-concert with local governments and organizations. In such instances, public affairs officers and the Global Engagement Center have taken the lead on these efforts.

Increasing Partner Transparency and Openness: Finally, USG-led advocacy for greater openness and transparency has been important for facilitating coordination in the region between its Western allies and local partners. The DoD, in close partnership with NATO, has led capacity building efforts to bolster cyber defense capabilities to insulate regional actors from Russian malign cyber threats, including the provision of funding and military liaisons. The DoD, DoS, and NATO have all been central in leading efforts to declassify and share information with citizens to debunk disinformation, particularly since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Contemporary NATO efforts since the invasion of Ukraine, as exemplified during the 2022 Madrid summit, describe Russia as the "most significant and direct threat to Allies' security" and

continually espouse a desire to increase institutional transparency. In addition to capacity building efforts, NATO and the DoD also administer counter-hybrid centers in Europe to counter disinformation, propaganda, and cyber attacks, with the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki, Finland being a successful example of such efforts. As seen in Annex 1, Figure 1 provides a Russian malign threats map produced by the research team that shows the clear connections between Russian malign threats, mechanisms, and USG response.

4. Five Key Factors have the Potential to Strengthen or Weaken Russian Malign Threats, and conversely, the USG response. These Include Local Stakeholder buy-in, Russian Cultural and Linguistic Ties, Freedom of Expression, Corruption, and External Crises and Events

Figure 4: Strengthening/Weakening Factors

Throughout the interview process, participants discussed several confounding factors present in each target country that serve to either strengthen or weaken Russian malign activities and USG responses, depending on individual country context. These are factors that are mostly inherent in local societies, institutions, and governments, serving as organic conduits or obstacles that directly affect the efficacy of Russian and USG activities - and should ideally inform the latter.

Local Stakeholder Buy-In: Combined action presents a more united and effective front than a piecemeal approach. Partner buy-in refers to the approach of allied countries, the USG, and individual departments or media organizations when combating Russian malign influence. Presently, the media in allied countries and the USG work in competition with one another, which makes spreading disinformation by the Kremlin easier. This strengthening factor for malign influence creates challenges in tracking and mitigating disinformation. Subsequently, the disunified approach creates competing narratives among aligned entities that are individually trying to combat the Kremlin in the information sphere.

This disjointed approach results in multiple narratives across partner states with varying levels of efficacy. Without a systemic response of partner buy-in relating to the information sphere, Kremlin disinformation has more avenues to exploit. The end state leads to promulgation of misinformation by individuals that consume and believe the narratives pushed by the Kremlin. Without consistent partner buy-in and a unified front to the information sphere, and other factors discussed, the cyclical nature of targeted exploitation, penetration by disinformation, and

promulgation by unaware individuals will continue as a strengthening factor for Russian malign influence.

Cultural/Linguistic Ties: Russian-speaking communities exist throughout Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus regions, especially in the former Soviet constituent republics. These minorities have previously been used as flashpoints by the Moscow regime, especially following Putin's 2014 declaration outlining Russia's "right" and "obligation" to protect Russians anywhere in the world.

Even in countries nominally at odds with Russia, local populists decry the imposition of liberal Western values and paint Russia as a bulwark of conservative ideology. The European Parliament commissioned a briefing on disinformation campaigns targeting LGBT+ communities in the European Union. Meanwhile, Russian support to European populist movements benefits it in several ways: it helps keep pro-Russian discourse close to mainstream politics, it foments domestic and EU-wide disunity, and emphasizes bilateral approaches to foreign affairs—which Russia naturally prefers to the multilateral.

The cultural aspect in regards to impacting Russia's influence efforts varies by country. The number of Russian speakers, penetration of the Orthodox Church, and strength of the Soviet historical legacy (the centrality of the Soviet Union fighting the Great Patriotic War against the fascists and once again being threatened by imperialism) abroad all influence how receptive populations across the examined geography are to Russian influence efforts.

Freedom of Expression: Similarly, the strength of rule of law and freedom of expression varies across target countries, and can affect the effectiveness of Russia's influence efforts either positively or negatively. Strong freedom of expression ingrained within societies benefits the security of Western non-governmental organizations that strive to provide narratives countermanding Russian disinformation. Likewise, erstwhile support for rule of law—and its manifestations in independent judiciaries, checks and balances, and free elections—can mitigate illiberal politicians' capture of institutions.

This works both ways. In Belarus, for example, freedom of expression remains highly restricted. In a positive feedback loop, government repression serves to prevent its citizens from becoming aware of the repression taking place, leaving the government free to continue or expand the scope of its endeavors. Last year, after Belarusian media staff went on strike to protest the Lukashenko regime, Russian channel RT quickly flew in journalists to prop up Belarusian state media. Extending Russian operational capacity is not the only way having weak institutional freedoms can affect the threat of Russian malign influence: pro-Western media organizations' rights to operate can be eroded, and political strongmen can more easily present nationalist sentiments that exacerbate regional and ethnic tensions.

Corruption: Nearly all interviews mentioned the vacuum created by unchecked corruption within target countries. While corruption does not directly equate to malign influence, the *existence* of corruption (be it in the form of the bribing politicians and businesspeople or the lack of faith in governmental/civil society institutions caused by corruption) can be leveraged by Russian malign influence actors as a means to disrupt governments and societies. According to the Global Competitiveness Index, several of these target countries (Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and North Macedonia) experience some of the world's highest rates of brain drain - which exacerbates the detrimental effects of corruption.

Corruption as a transnational phenomenon deserves explicit mention: globalization, usually touted as a profoundly anti-authoritarian trend, has served to advance Russia's marque of corruption by facilitating untraceable transfers of illicit wealth through an increasingly interconnected financial system—often aided by Western financial services professionals. This complicity is not covert, and while victims realize Russia as the perpetrator, public perceptions of Western inaction or reluctance to clamp down reduce the effectiveness of anti-disinformation narratives.

External Crises and Events: Several significant crises have affected the contemporary influence landscape. Russia has taken advantage of vaccine skepticism due to COVID-19 and used it to supplement its cultural attraction. The pandemic's severity also incentivized states to respond to it individually, which allowed Russia to advance its geopolitical aims through the disbursement of vaccines and personal protective equipment. By doing so, Russia sought some EU countries' willingness to lift sanctions and targeted EU unity. In the information space, Russia advanced conspiracy theories aimed at undermining public trust in institutions and highlighting democracies' incompetence in managing the virus.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the other key crisis affecting the strength of disinformation efforts. The immense number of Ukrainian refugees displaced within Eastern Europe has heightened tensions and provided ample ammunition to Russian disinformation campaigns which seek to demonize them: within Russia, narratives depict millions fleeing from the supposed 'Nazis' in control of the country, while narratives throughout the rest of Europe describe refugees as parasitic and dangerous.

5. In the Diplomatic and Development Spheres, USG Strategy Becomes Increasingly Granular as it Descends Agency Hierarchies. The Russia Influence Group Facilitates Agency-Level Coordination, but Coordination at the Regional and Country Level is Less Formal

Response coordination is a multi-faceted process that begins at the agency level with a joint strategic plan coordinated by the DoS and the USAID. From the joint strategic plan, regional-

level organizations and bureaus, DoS integrated country strategies, and interagency coordination map out their individual portions that constitute the response. The current joint strategic plan spans Fiscal Year 2022-2026 and has five primary goals. For country intervention, only diplomacy and development are pertinent to this research. However, the joint strategy and follow-on guidance make clear the connection between diplomacy, development, and defense.
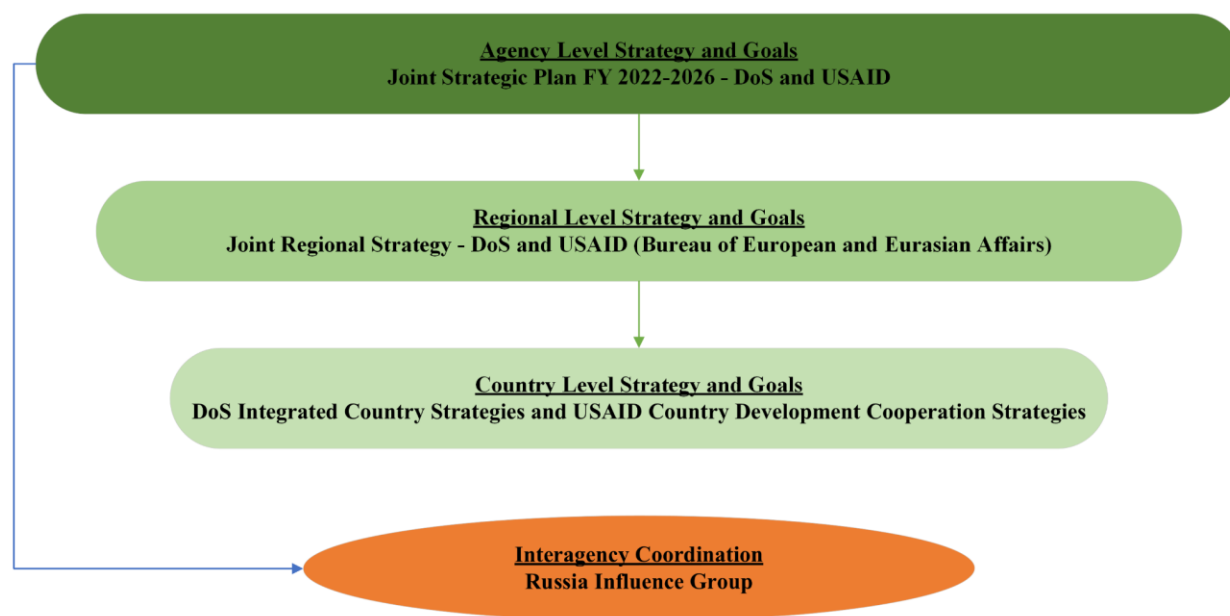
The first is to facilitate international cooperation and partner capacity building to combat malign cyber threats, disinformation, and digital repression. Facilitation of cooperation is achieved through cross-agency coordination in the information space. Localization and development of host country assets, such as media literacy programs, enhance the ability to identify and counter cyber threats and disinformation. Bolstering U.S. credibility by leveraging technology to counter disinformation, foster a trustworthy information space, and enhance outreach and engagement to local populations is the second goal. To improve its credibility, the USG runs local programs and training initiatives with U.S. technology, coordinates information releases among USG agencies, and provides intelligence to partner countries.

To utilize direct diplomacy and development to champion democratic norms and demonstrate the benefits of democratic governance is the third goal. The USG achieves this by running media campaigns, which often includes social media and popular platforms, of what life looks like inside a democracy versus an authoritarian state. The USG also leverages aid and diplomatic meetings to push states towards democratic norms. Where inequity is rampant in Russia, the USG seeks to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in partner countries to protect against Russia's leveraging of inequality to fracture societies. While a pair of societies may have equal levels of inequity, one authoritarian and the other democratic, the USG looks to build partner country equity as Russia leverages gaps in inequality to cause tension among social groups.

The last goal of the agency level strategic plan is to root out corruption in partner countries that increases vulnerability to Russian malign activities. Corrupt officials are more susceptible to payments by the Kremlin or Russian proxies to lean in a direction more favorable to Kremlin goals. By eliminating corruption in partner countries, the USG reduces this vulnerability.

Under the agency plan comes regional level joint strategies between the DoS and USAID Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. The regional strategy is a step removed from the macro-level and begins to address more tangible actions to follow the guidance from higher-level strategy. There are five goals at the regional strategy level. The first is to strengthen democracy and rule of law across the region (Europe and Eurasia). This takes the form of promoting democratic candidates, norms, and equitable systems of law. Building partner capacity to resist and counter Russian disinformation and cyberattacks is the second goal, with mechanisms for coordination similar to the agency level.

To address corruption via civil society development, community engagement, and increased transparency is the third goal. The fourth is to counter Russia's non-market and coercive economic practices by promoting more robust trade, investment, and energy cooperation between the U.S., EU, and regional partners. The last goal is to facilitate Russian strategic failure and promote peaceful resolutions to Russian-backed territorial disputes by leveraging alliances and partnerships, particularly in the Western Balkans and South Caucasus.

At a lower level, the DoS has prepared integrated strategies for each country which covers many spheres of influence. Each country strategy makes reference to military assistance and cooperation to build capacity for security independence. Further, investment in the energy sector to promote energy independence (given Russia's considerable energy market), often through green energy projects. In line with higher level strategies, each country strategy also addresses capacity building of democratic institutions and civil society to fight corruption, and promote good governance and the rule of law. Emphasis is also placed on supporting economic reforms that foster closer trade, investment, and energy ties. The last two subjects addressed by the integrated country strategies are media literacy education and access to Western media to counter disinformation and to promote regional integration and cooperation, with emphasis between neighbors and tense relations. Interestingly, of the ten countries examined in this study, Belarus was the only country that did not mention malign influence in any context in its integrated country strategy. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and North Macedonia all explicitly mentioned malign Kremlin influence (Moldova mentioned solely general malign influence) within their respective USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategy reports.

The last piece to the three levels of strategy discussed is the interagency coordination organization which meets to set strategy and priorities: the Russia Influence Group (RIG). The

membership comprises the DoS, DoD, many intelligence community agencies, and others, with each contributing to response coordination.

Relating to responses from the interviews conducted, several participants emphasized the importance of localization in many forms. Building localization capacity for cyber defense, economic development, and democracy were consistent points brought up by interviewees. In terms of coordinating response on disinformation and counter narratives, nearly every participant mentioned or discussed coordinated information-sharing, interagency press releases and with partner countries, and efforts undertaken by joint teams to understand how misinformation works.

Formal interagency coordination on this issue occurs in the RIG, an interagency working group co-led by the Department of State Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs and the Department of Defense U.S. European Command. Along with other partners such as the Global Engagement Center, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, intelligence community agencies, U.S. Cyber Command, and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (formerly the Broadcasting Board of Governors), RIG facilitates a whole of government approach to understanding and countering Russian influence operations, particularly by supporting the development of a national strategy for information operations. Worth noting, however, is that the most recent publicly available information on RIG is from 2017, potentially making this report's consideration of the working group outdated. As seen in Annex 2, Figure 2 maps out the structure of strategy and coordination related to DoS and USAID strategy documents at the agency, bureau, and country levels.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Operationalize a whole-of-government response for countering Russian malign influence that guides agency goals and interagency coordination
Throughout interviews, a recurring theme was a lack of formal coordination for whole-of-government response. USAID had the most cogent strategy and was one of several members of the Russia Influence Group, though RIG is an informal mechanism more than one that routinely sets strategy priorities. Interagency collaboration will become a force multiplier when each agency brings its specialty and unique missions to the table. While USAID can focus on developmental aspects, the intelligence community can run intelligence collection to better inform where development would be most impactful. An organizing principle will ensure continuity of approach and aligned priorities that can better combat Russian malign influence. Greater interagency coordination will enable the implementation of subordinate strategies to agencies in piecemeal fashion, allowing each organization to focus on its specific mission. Catering each organization's tactics in the way that each one can best contribute is more effective than each organization having its own isolated approach to countering Russian malign influence. Further, a continuity plan that addresses the long-term and gets ahead of current

issues, rather than exclusively managing current threats, will increase the efficacy of holistic USG response. A proactive approach necessitates long-term interagency planning to spot, assess, develop, and mitigate future threats. This is only possible through defined and clearly organized joint strategies that address each organization, their approach, and contribution to the overarching mission.

Recommendation 2: Take a more creative approach to information, to make more engaging materials to supplement media literacy education
Media that is backed by the West in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus has struggled not only in terms of its hold on the local media apparatus, but largely due to the product being broadcasted, which is seen as unengaging and lacking in entertainment quality when compared to media coming from the pro-Russian sphere. Multiple interview participants recommended using more engaging forms of media that grab the attention of viewers, such as the usage of contemporary memes or comedy-inspired infotainment. These aspects of information-sharing would increase viewer retention due to the entertaining nature of them, which (when coupled with media literacy education) provides a more comprehensive medium in supplementing counter-Russian influence amongst local populations.

Several USG officials and researchers who participated in interviews stated that the U.S. needs to create media that, while newsworthy and credible in its reporting, emphasizes creativity in its approach to reaching a larger audience and remaining engaging. This is particularly valuable in supplementing education on Russian disinformation and countering narratives put forth by malign influence actors, as education as a standalone is not enough in terms of retaining engagement amongst audiences. One official stated that the USG should take cues from Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* in its programming, blending comedy with journalism to garner viewership from a large audience while simultaneously providing newsworthy coverage of events that compete with Russian-sponsored infotainment.

Recommendation 3: Promote more equitable partnerships and exercise relations with humility – a principle that should not only be practiced in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, but also in other regions such as Africa
Two significant components of the USG response to Russian malign influence is capacity building and realizing Russian strategic failure in the region. Strategic failure will rely heavily on resilient regional partners that are capable of self-sustained defense against malign activities. The goal of building robust democracies is significant in its own right, however. Building capacity in this regard will enable strong civil societies to emerge that are both less susceptible to Russian malign influence while simultaneously having a likely pro-Western form of governance. With this said, multiple interview participants stated that the USG needs to support these capacity building activities and promotion of democracy for the sake of their own right, *not* for that of simply combatting Russian influence operations. The support for these sectors for the sake of

fighting malign Kremlin influence is seen as disingenuous amongst local actors and leads to a lack of support amongst populations, as they are seen as "pawns" in a greater geopolitical power struggle.

There are some within Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus who believe that U.S. attitudes toward Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union were punitive rather than benevolent, which contributed towards local hostility against the U.S./NATO and benefited Russian malign influence operations within these regions. Additionally, some local populations within these target countries see the relationship between their states and the U.S. as one that is one-sided to their disadvantage. This was reinforced by some respondents, who opined that due to the preeminence of local actors throughout the process of combating Russian influence, America needs to act more humbly regarding negotiations and collaborative efforts with them. One respondent commented about their experience with the State Partnership Program and interactions with international military officers and how, when they would host, the red carpets would be rolled out, the American personnel would be brought to home-cooked dinners, and a sense of personal connection was established. If the USG took a similar approach in interacting with other countries, on a broader scale, relations would likely improve and demonstrate the value that the USG and its personnel place on interactions and relationships with other countries.

Recommendation 4: Use nuanced language in messaging that promotes the benefits of U.S. partnership while highlighting Moscow's historical and contemporary abuses
Putin constantly draws allegories to the Great Patriotic War when describing the invasion of Ukraine and Russia's constant battle versus the West in the information space; similarly, no references are made to the bevy of Soviet-era human-rights violations. Pro-Western messaging needs to viscerally emphasize these crimes and contest the image promulgated by Russia as always on the right side of history. Similarly, the tangible benefits of cooperation with the U.S. and its allies should be emphasized—foreign trade and investment as a GDP driver, internet penetration, and monetary technical/financial assistance, just to name a few. Several interviewees mentioned a need to focus on positive messaging—this would drive bottom-up engagement and reinforce perceptions of America's investment in the geography, as opposed to the idea that the U.S. only bothers with eastern Europe and the south Caucasus to contest Russia's presence.

4. CONCLUSION

This research provides an initial examination of the perceived threats and mechanisms to realize malign Russian influence, and the current avenues of response that are being used by the U.S. Government in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. While we found evidence that there is consensus on the aspects of the macro level threat of malign Russian influence and some structure and coordination for the response to that threat in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, there remains opportunity to be more deliberate, specific, and coordinated in USG efforts in the region.

As outlined in the gaps listed in Section 3, the ongoing approach by the USG toward countering malign Russian influence in these regions has struggled, due to a myriad of factors: a lack of a whole-of-government doctrine, strategies that do not fully encompass inter-society dynamics or ethnic/minority communities, and media outreach that does not retain the same level of engagement and viewership as that coming from the Kremlin or its affiliates. It is the belief of the research team, based on the analysis of strategic documents, academic literature, and findings obtained through the interview process with our pool of participants, that the recommendations put forth in this study would help move the USG in the direction of implementing strategies that can mitigate the effects of Russian malign influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. With this said, the USG would be well-served to emphasize continuity of information between agencies (both domestic and those belonging to the governments of target countries) and the creation of a whole-of-government strategy in countering malign Russian influence in these regions will lend itself to a stronger force in combating this issue.

More research is greatly needed in this field of study, both outlining the effects Russian malign influence operations have on the regions included in this piece of research and on how the USG can better mitigate (and coordinate its response) to this threat. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, coupled with the political and social fallout it has had within both Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus in terms of malign influence operations, shows that this threat can greatly expand in a short period of time. Both Georgia and Ukraine's susceptibility to malign influence in 2008 and 2014 respectively led to the initiation of armed conflict, and such events could emerge in potential flashpoints such as Kosovo and Moldova if mitigation practices are not employed in a timely manner. Recent tensions in these locales in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War, oftentimes stoked by actors operating at the behest of the Kremlin, shows that counter-influence operations are a necessity. Regardless, the USG needs to improve its capabilities and capacity of its partner governments in these regions to directly counter this threat: Washington can only provide so much assistance, and the onus largely depends on local actors in counter-influence, due to both the localized context of malign influence that the U.S. occasionally overlooks/is unable to adequately respond to and the fact that local capacity and initiative with strengthen partner relationships between target countries and Western allies. While completely eliminating the threat of Russian malign influence may not be a feasible goal at this current juncture, it would be detrimental to our partners in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus if USG efforts were to be disengaged. Therefore, with certain changes to how malign influence is countered, as outlined in our recommendations, there can be stronger responses towards fighting this threat in the future.

5. ANNEX

ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study incorporates two methods for data collection: a literature review on the matter of Russian malign influence, particularly in the wake of the Russo-Ukraine conflict; and key informant interviews with members of the American diplomatic, military, and intelligence apparatus, as well as researchers and journalists familiar with Russian malign influence operations in the Balkans and South Caucasus regions.

In preparation for the interviews and as part of the final research report, the research team has conducted literature reviews studying the literature on Russian malign influence in these targeted regions. This literature review assisted the team members as they talked to practitioners, researchers, and experts in the field of countering Russian malign influence.

Data   Collection   Methods
The research team conducted remote interviews of American government officials (including those from the Department of State and USAID), journalists, and researchers primarily over Zoom, using a semi-structured interview format. In instances where Zoom was an unviable medium, interviews were conducted via telephone. The semi-structured interview questions are presented in Annex I. Interviews averaged approximately 30-45 minutes in length and were conducted between February 21st and March 31st, 2023. Each interview was conducted with one researcher conducting questioning and another researcher taking notes. Audio recording of interviews was performed in instances where the interview subject granted consent. The data was cleaned, coded, and analyzed for patterns using Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Word, and NVivo. The interviews were coded to ensure the confidentiality of the interviewees.

Sampling   Plan
Interview subjects were identified by using publicly available contact information or through organizational websites, as well as reaching out to researchers, scholars, and industry experts who are well-known in studying and analyzing Russian malign influence. In instances where limited contacts were available or additional information would be potentially useful, the team deemed it prudent to utilize an additional purposive (i.e., snowball) recruitment approach. Respondents were asked whether they had any recommendations for other appropriate people for the research team to speak with.

Human Subjects Protection
The research team took the utmost care to ensure that the confidentiality of respondents was protected. Transcripts of the interviews were kept in a password-protected document on the team's private shared drive and destroyed following the completion of the coding process. Interviews were conducted in secure locations containing only the subject and the researchers and without any outside parties present.

Description of Data Analysis
The research team established a set of standardized codes in the form of a codebook to facilitate the data analysis of this project following the qualitative coding of interviews in NVivo. Codes included (but were not limited to) breaking Western linkages, corruption, dependency, media and information, and USG strategy. Overarching themes from interviews that fit these criteria were then individually analyzed by the team as a collective and summarized in an additional data sheet to facilitate findings and recommendations. Media and information was overwhelmingly the most common response by participants coded as a key point of concern in terms of both influence perpetrated by the Russian government and a weak area of USG response. The research team also analyzed documents from the Department of State (Integrated Country Strategies) and USAID (Country Development Cooperation Strategies) to create a more holistic overview of malign influence in the case studies analyzed when compared and contrasted with the insights gained from interviews.

Limitations
A major limiting factor of this study were time constraints placed upon the research team in regards to interview subjects. The research team had roughly three and a half months during an academic semester to interview subjects. Further, available documentation on Russian malign influence was produced prior to the start of the war in Ukraine. Due to the sensitive nature of this subject matter, the University of Maine's Institutional Review Board permitted interviews to only take place with American citizens or foreign citizens who were located in the United States. Potential participants abroad required additional clearance from their respective host country's ethical human subjects research boards in conjunction with the University of Maine Institutional Review Board; this could not be accommodated due to the length of this process when coupled with the structure of this semester-long research project. This prevented the research team from documenting a more niche view of Russian malign influence operations in our target countries of study, as many of the American practitioners and researchers that were interviewed had a broader overview of the issue. An additional limitation in this sector was conducting interviews with personnel affiliated with the USG, particularly embassies abroad. Diplomatic officials seeking to participate in this study required clearances several weeks in advance with the State Department's Office of Press Operations in Washington, D.C., which placed time constraints on the research team in scheduling interviews.

Ultimately, the largest limitation in the area of contacting these individuals and organizations is the sensitive security situation regarding Russian malign influence in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, which is further complicated by the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the wake of the February 2022 invasion. The sensitive nature of this area of research, in the context of political, social, and security matters, impacted how comfortable individuals or organizations would be with partaking in the interview process. USG officials may have not been at liberty to discuss this subject matter due to the sensitivity of their work on countering Russian malign influence, or potentially sharing views that contradict the official position of the USG within this area.

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