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RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND THE 2026 U.S. MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Foreign Influence, Domestic Divisions and the New Information Battlefield

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines Russian influence activity surrounding the 3 November 2026 U.S. midterm elections, focusing on the operations, narratives and distribution methods used to shape the American information environment. The findings identify two distinct Russian-linked influence operations, a wider pattern of domestic amplification, and an overt Russian state-media campaign. Together, these activities demonstrate how foreign influence operations can exploit existing political divisions, manipulate trusted media formats and use domestic intermediaries to extend the reach of fabricated content.

Key Findings

- **Two Russian-linked influence operations targeted the U.S. midterm information environment.** These employed different, but complimentary approaches. In September, Matryoshka, also known as Operation Overload, circulated fabricated celebrity videos and manipulated news-branded content targeting Democratic candidates. In October, Storm-1516 launched a series of fabricated allegations against Democratic Senate candidates, using AI-manipulated footage, impersonation and networks of established amplifiers. Multiple independent research organizations linked the respective campaigns to these Russian influence operations.
- **Storm-1516 used targeted fabrications to undermine individual candidates.** Within nine days, fabricated allegations of sexual assault or workplace abuse targeted James Talarico in Texas, Sherrod Brown in Ohio and Troy Jackson in Maine. The operation appropriated the identities of real individuals and, in two cases, impersonated local television stations. The Jackson case also demonstrates how fabricated allegations can build upon genuine political controversies, escalating existing narratives rather than creating them from scratch.
- **Influence operations relied on intermediaries to achieve wider distribution.** The initial content was often published by newly created or anonymous accounts before being circulated by larger accounts with documented histories of sharing Storm-1516 material. These intermediaries generated substantially greater measurable reach than the original posts. This pattern illustrates the importance of amplification networks in moving fabricated content from marginal accounts into wider political discussions.
- **Russian operations exploited an already polarized domestic information environment.** Their content frequently overlapped with themes circulating through domestic political communication, allowing foreign fabrications to enter existing partisan debates. The targeted candidates faced criticism and attacks from U.S. politicians, commentators and partisan accounts, including openly political AI-generated material. These domestic activities must be distinguished from Russian-linked operations: no evidence establishes that the domestic actors examined in this report coordinated with Russia. The campaign against

Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan provides a further example. Although Russian state media covered the candidate, SSI found no evidence that Russian-linked networks amplified or repackaged the anti-Muslim narratives that dominated the domestic campaign.

- **Russian state media promoted narratives favorable to Moscow's interests.** RT and Sputnik framed the elections around the Russian diesel deal, energy prices, political polarization and the limited prospects for a change in U.S. policy towards Russia. Their coverage sought to associate Democratic opposition to the diesel agreement with higher costs for American households and to portray U.S. political divisions as persistent. This constituted overt state-media messaging, SSI found no evidence of systematic coordination between these publications and the covert influence networks examined in the report.
- **The most significant demonstrated effects concern information integrity, not electoral outcomes.** The documented campaigns misused trusted media brands, appropriated the identities of private individuals and circulated fabricated allegations through large online accounts. Some view counts were inflated by bot activity, and available evidence does not establish that the operations persuaded voters or changed electoral behavior. No Russian-linked Election Day fabrication was documented in the sources reviewed for 3–4 November, and no reliable evidence of compromised election infrastructure was identified.

The findings point to a broader development in contemporary information influence operations: foreign actors do not need to create political divisions to exploit them. By inserting fabricated content into an already polarized information environment and relying on domestic intermediaries for distribution, Russian-linked operations can blur the distinction between foreign manipulation and domestic political communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2026 U.S. midterm elections took place in an information environment marked by intense political polarization, declining public confidence in institutions and the growing use of generative artificial intelligence in political communication. These conditions created opportunities for foreign influence actors to exploit existing divisions, target candidates and circulate fabricated content across platforms used by American audiences.

Russian influence activity against U.S. elections is not new. Since 2016, successive election cycles have demonstrated Russia's interest in exploiting political divisions, undermining confidence in democratic institutions and influencing perceptions of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. The 2026 midterms, however, revealed an increasingly sophisticated combination of established influence techniques and accessible synthetic-media technologies. Fabricated videos, manipulated audio, impersonated individuals and counterfeit news broadcasts featured prominently in campaigns targeting Democratic candidates.

The election period also highlighted the role of distribution networks. In several cases examined in this report, fabricated content first appeared on obscure or newly created accounts before being amplified by larger accounts with histories of circulating material associated with Russian influence operations. This enabled fabricated allegations to reach audiences far beyond the original sources. Meanwhile, domestic political actors produced and circulated their own attacks, including AI-generated material, placing foreign fabrications alongside domestic political messaging.

This report investigates the extent to which, and the methods through which, Russian state-linked actors sought to influence the information environment surrounding the 2026 U.S. midterm elections. It examines two Russian-linked influence operations Matryoshka/Operation Overload and Storm-1516, as well as Russian state-media coverage, the amplification of fabricated content and the interaction between foreign influence activity and domestic political divisions.

The analysis considers the limits of attribution. Not every deceptive narrative or politically divisive campaign originates in Russia, and Russian state-media coverage does not establish covert involvement. The report therefore distinguishes between Russian-linked operations, overt state-media messaging, domestic political amplification and activity for which attribution remains unresolved.

The central argument is that Russian-linked actors used AI-enabled fabrication, impersonation and intermediary amplification to target candidates and exploit an already polarized American information environment. While the evidence establishes identifiable Russian-linked activity, it does not demonstrate that these operations changed voter behavior or affected the electoral outcome. Their significance lies in manipulating the information environment, targeting individuals and eroding trust in the authenticity of political and media content.

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2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ATTRIBUTION FRAMEWORK

This report covers the period from 10 September to 4 November 2026. The analysis is based on SSI's independent research and systematic observation of election-period information activity, supplemented by reporting from independent research organizations, fact-checkers and media outlets. The research examined primary material, including social media posts, archived content, screenshots, video footage and public statements.

The analysis involved reviewing and consolidating the collected material, removing duplicated incidents, checking key claims against available sources and distinguishing Russian-linked activity from domestic political communication. Cases without sufficient evidence of Russian involvement were excluded from the attribution findings or retained only as contextual examples.

To assess the evidence consistently, the report uses five categories:

1. Established Russian-linked activity: attributed by multiple independent research organizations to a known Russian influence operation or state-linked entity, supported by converging technical, behavioral or account-level evidence.
2. Probable or suspected Russian involvement: credible indicators exist, but the available evidence is insufficient for firm attribution.
3. Russian state-media messaging: overt narratives disseminated by Russian state-controlled or state-aligned media, but these do not, by themselves, establish covert activity.
4. Domestic political amplification: circulation by U.S. politicians, organizations, commentators, influencers or ordinary users, including amplification of Russian-linked content without evidence of coordination.
5. Unattributed activity: deceptive or suspicious activity for which the responsible actor cannot be established.

Attribution is based on the convergence of evidence, including technical analysis, operational patterns, account histories and distribution networks. Political benefit to Russia, criticism of U.S. policy or unusual account-location labels are not treated as sufficient evidence of Russian involvement.

The report distinguishes between attribution to an established influence operation and identification of the individuals directing it. The specific incidents examined have not been publicly attributed by a U.S. government agency; the findings rely on independent investigations. Finally, online reach is not treated as evidence of persuasion or electoral impact. View counts and engagement indicate distribution, not changes in voter behavior.

3. RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE 2026 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Russia's interest in the midterms flows from the role Congress plays in U.S. policy on Ukraine, sanctions and European security. U.S. intelligence officials have long assessed that Russia targets Democrats to erode support for Ukraine. However, in October 2026, Senator Mark Warner and Representative Jim Himes, the senior Democrats on the two intelligence committees, said a classified report showed Russia opposing candidates of either party who back Ukraine.[1] Clemson University's Darren Linvill put the point directly: "At the end of the day, the main issue for Russia is and has to be Ukraine."[2]

Sanctions were a live issue during the campaign. On 9 October the Treasury Department issued General License 135, authorizing certain transactions for imports of Russian diesel until 7 April 2027, after President Trump announced a diesel supply deal with Vladimir Putin.[3] The deal was presented against a 70% rise in diesel prices since the war with Iran began.[4] On 16 October an executive order waived most of the Russia-related sanctions and tariffs in the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026, which had been signed less than a month earlier.[5] Putin's envoy Kirill Dmitriev called the suspension "an important and truly historic moment."[6] Six Republican and six Democratic senators wrote that the diesel deal was "a gift to our adversary and a betrayal of our allies."[7]

These developments gave Russia a concrete stake in the composition of Congress, which can oversee, investigate or legislate against such measures. They also made energy prices a natural theme for Russian messaging. Polarization and declining confidence in institutions are a further, longer-standing interest. A February 2026 Yahoo/YouGov survey found only 23% of Americans confident that the midterms would not be "rigged."[8] Reported U.S. intelligence assessments from September concluded that the Kremlin had authorized an online campaign to stir domestic divisions, that its main aim appeared to be to "sow chaos rather than aid one particular party," and that Russia was less focused on the midterms than on presidential races.[9]

These interests explain why Russia would act, but they do not show that any given piece of content was Russian. The case studies below establish what can be demonstrated.

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[1] Shannon Bond, "Russia Steps Up Election Influence Efforts in Final Stretch of Midterms," NPR, October 23, 2026, republished by High Plains Public Radio, https://www.hppr.org/npr-news/2026-10-23/russia-steps-up-election-influence-efforts-in-final-stretch-of-midterms.

[2] Bond, "Russia Steps Up."

[3] Jeffrey W. Cottle et al., "President Trump Waives New Russia Sanctions and Tariffs under the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia & Iran Act," Clyde & Co, October 21, 2026, https://www.clydeco.com/en/insights/2026/10/trump-waives-new-russia-sanctions-and-tariffs-unde.

[4] Al Jazeera Staff, "Trump Announces Russian Diesel Deal amid Soaring US Fuel Prices," Al Jazeera, October 9, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2026/10/9/trump-announces-russian-diesel-deal-amid-soaring-us-fuel-prices.

[5] Cottle et al., "President Trump Waives."

[6] "Putin Envoy Dmitriev Hails Trump's Russia Sanctions Waiver," *Outlook India*, October 2026, https://www.outlookindia.com/international/putin-envoy-dmitriev-trump-russia-sanctions-waiver.

[7] Barbara Sprunt, "Bipartisan Group of Senators Call on Trump to Rescind Russian Diesel Deal," NPR, October 13, 2026, republished by KPBS, https://www.kpbs.org/news/politics/2026/10/13/bipartisan-group-of-senators-call-on-trump-to-rescind-russian-diesel-deal.

[8] Yahoo/YouGov poll of 1,704 U.S. adults, fielded February 9–12, 2026, reported by Yahoo News, https://www.yahoo.com/news/politics/article/poll-as-the-2026-midterm-elections-approach-just-23-of-americans-are-confident-the-vote-will-not-be-rigged-221139207.html.

[9] Dustin Volz, Julian E. Barnes, and Steven Lee Myers, "Russia Aims to Inject Chaos Into Elections, U.S. Intelligence Finds," *New York Times*, September 18, 2026, republished by *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*, https://www.hawaiitribune-herald.com/?p=378016.

4. OVERVIEW OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE ACTIVITY

The documented activity falls into two waves, each attributed by researchers to a different operation.

Matryoshka / Operation Overload (September-October). From 10 September, inauthentic X accounts posted celebrity videos and fake news-branded clips attacking Democrats. Antibot4Navalny, which tracks the operation under the name Matryoshka, made the first public attribution. AFP, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), Clemson's Media Forensics Hub, Graphika and Bloomberg reached the same conclusion.[10] Graphika named nine Democratic targets in this wave: Talarico, Ossoff, Chris Pappas, Brown, Mary Peltola, Roy Cooper, El-Sayed, Joshua Turek and Jackson.[11] Bloomberg reviewed 130 videos and fabricated newspaper front pages published between 10 September and 9 October.[12]

Storm-1516 (October). Between 20 and 28 October, three fabricated videos accused Talarico, Brown and Jackson of sexual assault or workplace abuse. NewsGuard, Graphika, PolitiFact, the Gnida Project and Clemson researchers attributed them to Storm-1516.[13] Storm-1516 has been tracked since 2023. Bloomberg identified more than 190 fabricated Storm-1516 stories since August 2023, reported that the number of narratives more than doubled in the first quarter of 2026 compared with a year earlier, and cited Western officials who say the operation is run by Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU.[14]

The two operations should not be conflated. Matryoshka floods platforms with cheap, high-volume fakes amplified by bots. Storm-1516 produces fewer, more targeted fabrications and depends on large influencer accounts for reach. Graphika assessed that Operation Overload produced the September narratives jointly with the Foundation to Battle Injustice (R-FBI), founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, while Linvill's research links Storm-1516 to the same foundation.[15] Table 1 summarizes the evidence for each case.

[10] Bill McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Sets Sights on US Midterms," AFP, September 16, 2026, republished by CEDMO, https://cedmohub.eu/russian-disinformation-campaign-sets-sights-on-us-midterms/; Graphika Team, "Russia-Aligned Influence Operation Targets US Midterm Candidates, German State Elections," Graphika, September 21, 2026, https://www.graphika.com/insights/russia-aligned-influence-operation-targets-us-midterm-candidates-german-state-elections.

[11] Graphika, "Russia-Aligned Influence Operation."

[12] Rosa Cimin, "Russian Bot Campaign Targets Democrats in U.S. Midterm Elections Interference," *La Voce di New York*, October 20, 2026, https://lavocedinewyork.com/en/news/2026/10/20/russian-bot-campaign-targets-democrats-in-u-s-midterm-elections-interference/.

[13] PolitiFact, "Russian Influence Operation Linked to Attacks Targeting Democrats in Maine, Ohio, Texas," PolitiFact, October 30, 2026, https://politifact.com/article/2026/oct/30/russia-talarico-jackson-brown-storm-1516-senate/.; NewsGuard Reality Check, "Russia's Home-Stretch Attacks on Key Democrats," November 3, 2026, https://www.newsguardrealitycheck.com/p/russias-home-stretch-attacks-on-key.

[14] Stephanie Baker and Priyanjana Bengani, "The Most Potent Weapon in Russia's Disinformation War," Bloomberg, April 2026, https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2026-russia-disinformation-storm-1516-videos/.

[15] Graphika, "Russia-Aligned Influence Operation"; Mark Keierleber, "Inside the Russian Propaganda Group Injecting False Sexual Assault Allegations into Contentious Senate Races," Straight Arrow News, October 28, 2026, https://san.com/cc/inside-the-russian-propaganda-group-injecting-false-sexual-assault-allegations-into-contentious-senate-races/.

Table 1. Evidence and attribution by case

CASE	CONTENT	ATTRIBUTED TO	CLASSIFICATION	DOMESTIC LAYER
Celebrity endorsements (Sept.)	Cameo and other celebrity footage re-voiced; CNN branding	Matryoshka / Operation Overload (Antibot4Navalny, ISD, Clemson, Graphika, Bloomberg)	Established (researchers)	Hashtag pre-dated the campaign
James Talarico (20 Oct.)	Deepfake "former student" alleging sexual assault	Storm-1516 (Graphika, NewsGuard, PolitiFact, Gnida, Clemson)	Established (researchers)	Musk posts, party AI ad, partisan accounts: not Russian
Sherrod Brown (26 Oct.)	Fake Cleveland 19 newscast naming four real ex-staffers	Storm-1516 (Gnida, NewsGuard, Clemson)	Established (researchers)	U.S. accounts reposting amplifiers' posts
Troy Jackson (28 Oct.)	Fake WABI report alleging axe threats	Storm-1516 (NewsGuard, Gnida, Clemson)	Established (researchers); narrower evidence base	Builds on a real 2021 controversy
Abdul El-Sayed	Anti-Muslim and Brotherhood allegations	Domestic origin; Russian targeting in Sept. with unspecified content	Contextual: no Russian amplification found	Dominant
RT / Sputnik	Diesel deal, energy prices, polarisation	Russian state media	State-media messaging	Not applicable

Source: SSI analysis of the investigations cited in Sections 5-8

5. CANDIDATE-TARGETING OPERATIONS

5.1 James Talarico: the fabricated "former student"

The fabrication: On 20 October an X account created in September posted two videos in which a man presented himself as a former middle-school student of James Talarico, the Democratic Senate nominee in Texas, and accused him of sexual assault.[16] The account had few followers, and X flagged it as possibly using a VPN proxy.[17] The real former student, Zyon Lewis, told a fact-checker on 21 October that he was not the person in the video and that Talarico had never abused him, he later called Talarico "a great teacher."[18] Graphika assessed the videos as "very likely deepfakes," citing facial-motion anomalies and limited body movement, and found that the account very likely impersonated Lewis, whose public Facebook posts repeatedly expressed pride in having been Talarico's student.[19] The operation therefore did not invent an accuser. Rather, it appropriated the identity of a real, identifiable private individual.

[16] "Former Student Denies Claim in Likely Talarico Deepfakes," Magica, October 22, 2026, https://magica.com/news/russia-aligned-network-likely-deepfakes-james-talarico (summarising Graphika and Lead Stories); Media Bias/Fact Check, "Fact Check: Does a Video Show a Former Student Accusing James Talarico of Sexual Assault?," October 24, 2026, https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/fact-check-does-a-video-show-a-former-student-accusing-james-talarico-of-sexual-assault/.

[17] Bond, "Russia Steps Up."

[18] Lead Stories, fact check of the video purporting to show a former student of James Talarico, Lead Stories, October 2026, https://leadstories.com/hoax-alert/2026/10/fact-check-fake-video-shows-man-claiming-to-be-ex-student-of-democratic-senate-nominee-james-talarico-real-zyon-lewis-says-it-is-not-him.html. ; Keierleber, "Inside the Russian Propaganda Group."

[19] Graphika, "Storm-1516 Produces Very Likely Deepfake Videos of Student Accusing Democratic Senate Candidate of Sexual Assault," Graphika, October 2026, https://www.graphika.com/insights/storm-1516-produces-very-likely-deepfake-videos-of-student-accusing-democratic-senate-candidate. Full text not independently retrievable by the editor; findings as summarised in the sources cited alongside; "Former Student Denies Claim."

Attribution: The Gnida Project attributed the videos to Storm-1516 on 21 October.[20] Graphika attributed them to Storm-1516 with high confidence, and PolitiFact and NewsGuard reached the same conclusion.[21] Linvill found that accounts sharing the material had previously shared Storm-1516 content.[22] Dartmouth's Hany Farid judged the video likely AI-generated and "consistent with previous disinformation campaigns released close to Election Day."[23] The template reproduces Storm-1516's 2024 fabrication accusing Tim Walz of abusing a former student, which drew almost five million views on X in under 24 hours.[24] On the combined technical, behavioral and account-level evidence, this is established Russian-linked activity at the level of independent research.

Distribution: A network of 15 accounts that Linvill identified as bots shared the post immediately. About twelve hours later, three large X accounts reshared one of the videos, one had solicited paid partnerships.[25] Analysts told the *New York Times* that all three had previously been used by Storm-1516.[26] One video drew roughly 857,000 views in 24 hours, according to the firm Alethea.[27] X suspended the original account and one large amplifier, and the other two deleted their posts, but copies with several hundred shares remained online a week later.[28] SSI identified surviving copies on 4 November, including one by @ROYALMRBADNEWS, an account that also re-uploaded the Brown fabrication discussed below.[29] Repeated distribution of two Storm-1516 products by the same account is notable, but it does not by itself establish coordination with the operation. SSI also recorded that Google's Gemini and Microsoft's Copilot repeated the false claim roughly 24 hours after the video surfaced, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.[30]

A second Russian-linked strand: Talarico was also targeted by the separate Matryoshka operation. Antibot4Navalny flagged fake CNN-branded reports about him in September, and Bloomberg documented a fake ABC News-branded clip falsely claiming he paid OnlyFans models.[31] He was thus the target of two distinct Russian-linked operations in the same cycle.

The domestic layer: Talarico faced intense domestic criticism that must be kept analytically separate. Elon Musk posted "In his own words" on 24 October and

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[20] Gnida Project (@gnidaproject), post on X, October 21, 2026, https://x.com/gnidaproject/status/2112855242178277581.

[21] Graphika, "Storm-1516 Produces Very Likely Deepfake Videos"; PolitiFact, "Russian Disinformation Group Targets James Talarico with Baseless Claim in AI-Generated Video," PolitiFact, October 22, 2026, https://politifact.com/factchecks/2026/oct/22/tweets/russian-disinformation-group-targets-james-talarico-with-baseless-claim-in-ai-generated-video/.

[22] Ali Swenson, "Disinformation Videos, Likely from Russia, Are Exploiting Real People to Malign Senate Candidates," Associated Press, October 28, 2026, republished by KTTC, https://www.kttc.com/2026/10/28/disinformation-videos-likely-russia-are-exploiting-real-people-malign-senate-candidates/.

[23] Swenson, "Disinformation Videos."

[24] Baker and Bengani, "Most Potent Weapon."

[25] Bond, "Russia Steps Up."

[26] Chelsie Napiza, "Russia-Linked AI Fakes Steal Real Americans' Identities to Target Democratic Senate Candidates Before Midterms," *International Business Times UK*, October 28, 2026, https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/ai-videos-russian-network-target-us-senate-candidates-1828444 (relaying reporting by the *New York Times*).

[27] Bond, "Russia Steps Up."

[28] Bond, "Russia Steps Up"; Swenson, "Disinformation Videos."

[29] @ROYALMRBADNEWS ("The Royal Judge / The Royal Court"), repost of the Talarico video on X, October 21, 2026, https://x.com/ROYALMRBADNEWS/status/2113095372239237141; @ROYALMRBADNEWS, re-upload of the fabricated Cleveland 19 video on X, October 27, 2026, https://x.com/ROYALMRBADNEWS/status/2114908732614492449.

[30] Council on Foreign Relations, article on AI chatbots and influence campaigns in the U.S. midterms, November 2, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/u-s-midterms-ai-chatbots-could-lend-influence-campaigns-new-credibility.

[31] McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign"; Cimin, "Russian Bot Campaign."

"Talarico will vote to take away your children and transition them" on 26 October.[32] Senate Republicans released an AI-generated advertisement about him in March, openly attributed to the party.[33] CNBC reported on 3 November that Ken Paxton's campaign had shared an AI-generated video of Talarico with a brief disclosure.[34] Partisan accounts portrayed him as a danger to children.[35] None of this material shared the Storm-1516 video, and nothing links it to Russia. SSI also identified accounts with inauthentic characteristics, including one created in November 2025 and located in Canada that posted identical replies under many Talarico posts on 24 October, and one created in August 2026 and located in India with an apparently AI-generated profile.[36] These are unattributed anomalies, not evidence of Russian activity. An account that reposted the video and was described in the working file as Iranian is likewise classified on location labels alone and is treated as unattributed.[37]

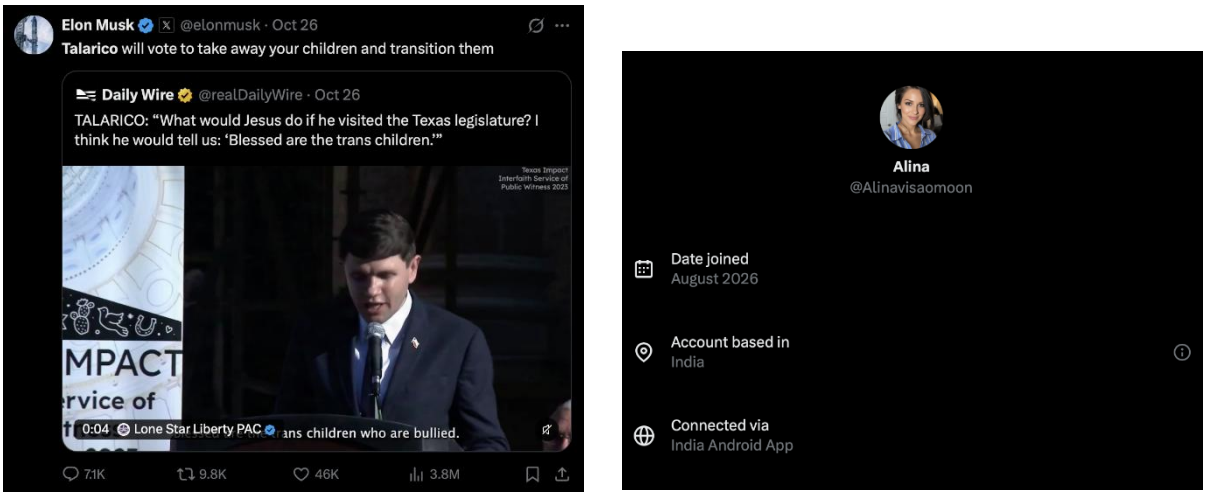


Figure 1. Two layers that must be kept apart. (a) Domestic criticism: Elon Musk's post of 26 October on Talarico. (b) Unattributed anomaly: the "About this account" page of @Alinavisaomoon, created August 2026 and labelled as based in India. Neither is linked to Storm-1516. *Screenshots: X, captured by SSI researchers, October 2026.*

Assessment: The assault video is established Russian-linked activity. Its significance lies less in its reach than in its convergence with domestic attacks on the same themes. Voters encountered a Russian fabrication, openly attributed partisan AI content and chatbot repetition of the false claim in the same fortnight, with no visible way to distinguish them.

5.2 Sherrod Brown: the fake Cleveland 19 newscast

The fabrication: At 18:58 UTC on 26 October, the verified X account @X_Global_tv, a self-styled news aggregator, posted a video presented as a report by Cleveland 19

[32] Elon Musk (@elonmusk), posts on X, October 24, 2026, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/2113869278889811989, and October 26, 2026, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/2114761043809378685.

[33] "Senate GOP Uses James Talarico's Words against Him with Deepfake Attack Ad," *Washington Examiner*, March 2026, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/?p=4488947.

[34] CNBC, report on AI-generated content in political advertising, November 3, 2026, https://www.cnbc.com/2026/11/03/ai-generated-slopaganda-in-political-ads-puts-platforms-on-alert.html.

[35] See, for example, posts on X by @clowncar1986, https://x.com/clowncar1986/status/2108329418544558505; @atensnut, https://x.com/atensnut/status/2113741854093275272; and @wineguru014, October 2026, https://x.com/wineguru014/status/2113310794028880032.

[36] @SamLenSports, reply on X, October 24, 2026, https://x.com/SamLenSports/status/2113869602060919058; @Alinavisaomoon, post on X, October 21, 2026, https://x.com/Alinavisaomoon/status/2112707493206057148. Account creation dates and location labels as displayed on X's "About this account" pages, which can be distorted by VPN use.

[37] @MO21_ALI, repost of the Talarico video on X, October 21, 2026, https://x.com/MO21_ALI/status/2112922734808154499.

(WOIO, the CBS affiliate). In it, anchor Nichole Vrsansky appears to say that four former staffers had accused Brown, the Democratic Senate candidate in Ohio, of sexual assault between 2019 and 2024. The video showed the names and photographs of four real former Brown staffers.[38] The account was suspended on 27 October, its original post survives only in screenshots published by researchers.[39]



The fake Cleveland 19 news segment posted by pro-Russian X user @X_Global_tv. (Screenshot via NewsGuard)

Figure 2. The original fabricated Cleveland 19 post by @X_Global_tv, 26 October 2026, showing 2,215 views at capture. The account was later suspended. *Screenshot via NewsGuard.*

Evidence of manipulation: The fake re-voices a genuine Cleveland 19 segment of 21 October about an advertisement in the Ohio governor's race, which does not mention Brown.[40] SSI researchers matched the anchor, her clothing and the on-screen clock and temperature between the two videos.[41] Lead Stories found that the transcript diverges after the first few words and that one clip was 88.4% likely to contain AI-generated speech, PolitiFact found that the anchor's lip movements and words had been altered.[42] Farid called it a "fairly low-tech fake."[43]

Denials: Cleveland 19 news director Brian Sinclair told NewsGuard: "We have reported no such thing."[44] Former intern Haya Akbik told the Associated Press that the claims attributed to her were "completely made up": "It's my name, it's my reputation, making this allegation, and it's just completely false."[45] A second named former intern, Sophia Egar, told PolitiFact that she had been "treated with nothing but respect and professionalism."[46]

[38] @X_Global_tv, post on X, October 26, 2026, https://x.com/X_Global_tv/status/2114793882429079570 (account suspended; post preserved in screenshots in the Gnida Project and Linvill posts cited below); NewsGuard Reality Check, report on the fabricated Cleveland 19 video targeting Sherrod Brown, October 27, 2026, https://www.newsguardrealitycheck.com/p/russia-fabricates-sexual-assault. Page could not be retrieved at the time of editing; verify before publication; @ROYALMRBADNEWS, Cleveland 19 re-upload.

[39] Gnida Project (@gnidaproject), post on X, October 26, 2026, https://x.com/gnidaproject/status/2114843596432064957; Darren Linvill (@DarrenLinvill), thread on X, October 27, 2026, https://x.com/DarrenLinvill/status/2115073682259280056.

[40] 19 News (WOIO), "Ramaswamy Campaign Takes Credit for Controversial Ad Featuring Acton's Estranged Mother," YouTube video, October 21, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmQJIzd40LU; NewsGuard, Cleveland 19 report.

[41] @ROYALMRBADNEWS, Cleveland 19 re-upload; 19 News, "Ramaswamy Campaign Takes Credit."

[42] Lead Stories, fact check of the fake Cleveland 19 report on Sherrod Brown, October 2026, https://leadstories.com/hoax-alert/2026/10/fact-check-fake-cleveland-19-report-four-former-staffers-have-accused-sherrod-brown-of-sexual-assault.html.; PolitiFact, "Russian Influence Operation Linked."

[43] Swenson, "Disinformation Videos."

[44] NewsGuard, Cleveland 19 report.

[45] Swenson, "Disinformation Videos."

[46] PolitiFact, "Russian Influence Operation Linked."

Attribution and amplifiers: The Gnida Project identified the video as a Storm-1516 product about three hours after it appeared.[47] NewsGuard described it as "the handiwork of Russian influence operation Storm-1516," based on its format and amplification pattern.[48] Linvill's analysis rests on account histories. He described the placement account as a type of aggregator Storm-1516 "uses regularly" and identified two principal amplifiers.[49] The first, @DangerousThinkg, reposted the video 14 minutes after it appeared; Linvill wrote that it had shared "so many previous Storm-1516 narratives I have lost count." The second, @its_The_Dr ("Johnny Midnight"), is described by Linvill as "deeply tied in with Storm."[50] Bloomberg had earlier found that this account posted about 60 Storm-1516 stories.[51] By 3 November, the two amplifier posts had recorded about 538,000 and 1.98 million views, and a re-upload by @ROYALMRBADNEWS about 589,000, compared with about 18,700 views for the original in its first day.[52] ISD's Joseph Bodnar told PolitiFact that Storm-1516 pays specific influencers: "They're basically buying an audience for a specific narrative." Some participate knowingly; others do not know who is behind the content.[53]

Domestic amplification: SSI documented a verified, U.S.-based account reposting @DangerousThinkg's posts on Brown in replies to posts supporting him.[54] This is domestic amplification of Russian-linked content; there is no evidence that the account was aware of, or connected to, the operation. X removed part of the Storm-1516-linked influencer network on 29-30 October; according to a count by the researcher David Colon, about a third of 27 identified influencer accounts were suspended, but the two principal Brown amplifiers remained active.[55]

[47] Gnida Project, post on X, October 26, 2026.

[48] NewsGuard, Cleveland 19 report.

[49] Linvill, thread on X, October 27, 2026.

[50] Linvill, thread on X, October 27, 2026.

[51] Baker and Bengani, "Most Potent Weapon."

[52] @DangerousThinkg, post on X, October 26, 2026, https://x.com/DangerousThinkg/status/2114797306654396768; @its_The_Dr, post on X, October 26, 2026, https://x.com/its_The_Dr/status/2114841235785470406. View counts as displayed on November 3, 2026; @ROYALMRBADNEWS, Cleveland 19 re-upload; NewsGuard, Cleveland 19 report.

[53] PolitiFact, "Russian Influence Operation Linked."

[54] @AresofRome, reposts on X, October 26–27, 2026, https://x.com/AresofRome/status/2114832473188155741, https://x.com/AresofRome/status/2114826346585268715, and https://x.com/AresofRome/status/2114821380516520245.

[55] Gnida Project (@gnidaproject), post on X relaying counts by David Colon, October 31, 2026, https://x.com/gnidaproject/status/2116511990768447577; Weaponized Spaces, Substack post on X's removal of Storm-1516-linked accounts, late October 2026, https://weaponizedspaces.substack.com/p/x-just-nuked-a-russian-disinformation; @DangerousThinkg and @its_The_Dr, posts on X, October 26, 2026.

Assessment: The Brown video is established Russian-linked activity at the level of independent research. The case shows the operation's dependence on intermediaries: almost all measurable reach came from accounts with documented Storm-1516 histories, not from the seeding account.



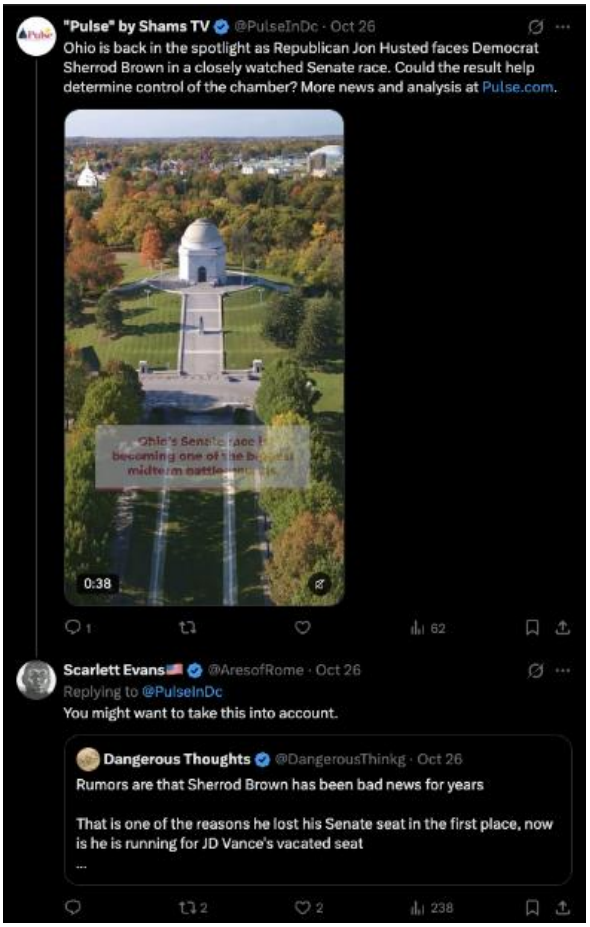


Figure 3. Domestic amplification: @AresofRome replying to pro-Husted and Ohio political posts with @DangerousThinkg's claims about Brown. *Screenshots: X, captured by SSI researchers, 28 October 2026.*

5.3 Troy Jackson: the fake WABI report

The fabrication: On 28 October a video styled as a report by WABI, a Maine television station, claimed that staff members had accused Troy Jackson, the Democratic Senate candidate, of verbal abuse and of threatening to kill "any insubordinate staffer" with an axe.[56] NewsGuard found that it combined AI-generated audio with real footage from a July 2026 WABI web report on Jackson's alleged "angry outbursts" as president of the Maine Senate.[57] WABI vice president Kim Petry told NewsGuard that the video "was not produced, aired, or authorized by WABI" and appears to use a synthetic voice.[58]

[56] Rebecca Ruiz, "Fake Video Accused Maine Democrat of Threatening Staffers with Axe," Mashable, October 30, 2026, via Yahoo News, https://www.yahoo.com/news/politics/articles/fake-video-accused-maine-democrat-213323407.html.

[57] NewsGuard Reality Check, "Russia Strikes Again, Targeting Maine's Troy Jackson," October 2026, https://www.newsguardrealitycheck.com/p/russia-strikes-again-targeting-maines.; Ruiz, "Fake Video Accused Maine Democrat."

[58] Ruiz, "Fake Video Accused Maine Democrat."

Exploiting a real controversy: Unlike the Talarico and Brown fabrications, this one built on an existing public story. *CNN* and the *Washington Post* reported in July that Jackson threw a water bottle during a 2021 meeting, his campaign acknowledged the incident but denied aiming at anyone.[59] The fake took that controversy and escalated it into a threat of violence. It illustrates the difference between creating a narrative and exploiting one.

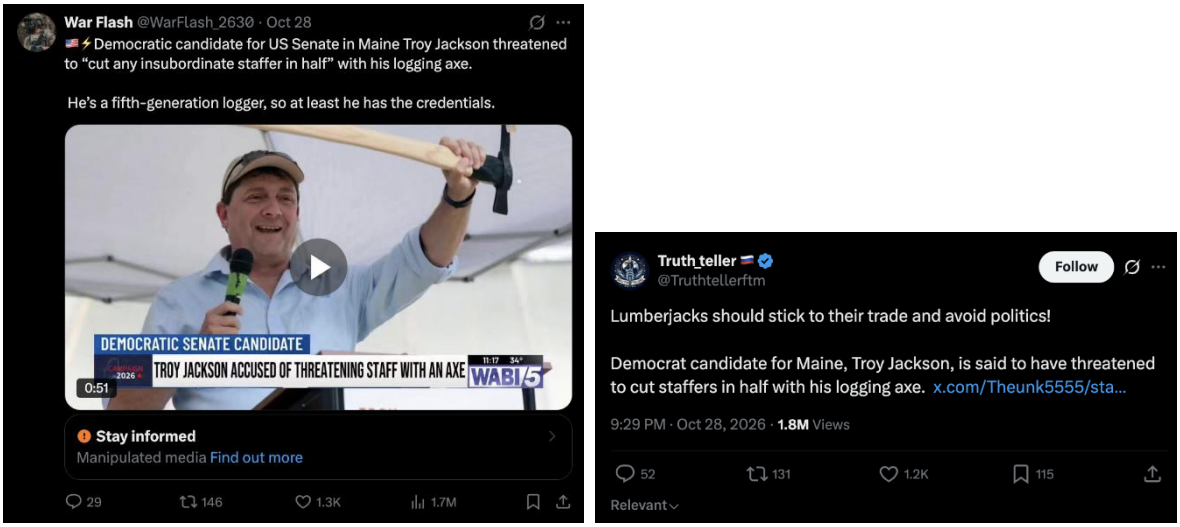


Figure 4. Continued circulation of the fake WABI report after the placement account was suspended. (a) @WarFlash_2630, carrying X's "Manipulated media" label; (b) @Truthtellerftm, which recorded about 1.8 million views at capture. *Screenshots: X, captured by SSI researchers, 28 October 2026.*

Attribution and links to the other cases: NewsGuard linked the video to Storm-1516 on the basis of its format and spread on X, and the Gnida Project labelled it "the latest Storm-1516 disinformation campaign."[60] Linvill identified @ALERTX360 as the aggregator that placed the video and noted that the same account had reposted the Brown narrative; @its_The_Dr amplified both.[61] Straight Arrow News reported that another account involved, @MmisterNobody, described itself as a satire account, funded by an online casino, it had more than 200,000 followers before its follower count collapsed to ten.[62] Copies, including one by an account located outside the United States, remained accessible after @ALERTX360 was suspended.[63] No government attribution has been published. The evidence is thinner than for Brown, resting largely on format and account overlap, but the shared amplifiers and timing place the Jackson video within the same operational pattern rather than as an isolated event.

[59] Ruiz, "Fake Video Accused Maine Democrat."

[60] NewsGuard, "Russia Strikes Again"; Gnida Project (@gnidaproject), post on X, October 28, 2026, https://x.com/gnidaproject/status/2115574427563774345.

[61] Darren Linvill (@DarrenLinvill), posts on X, October 29, 2026, https://x.com/DarrenLinvill/status/2115814645332103596 and https://x.com/DarrenLinvill/status/2115916442596233672.

[62] Mark Keierleber, "How Kremlin-Linked Operatives Use Social Media Influencers to Peddle US Election Lies," Straight Arrow News, October 30, 2026, https://san.com/cc/how-kremlin-linked-operatives-use-social-media-influencers-to-peddle-us-election-lies/.

[63] @WarFlash_2630, post on X, October 28, 2026, https://x.com/WarFlash_2630/status/2115510863436357759; @Truthtellerftm, post on X, October 28, 2026, https://x.com/Truthtellerftm/status/2115541566949408836.

6. FABRICATED MEDIA, IMPERSONATION AND MANIPULATED CONTENT

6.1 Celebrity impersonation and the #AllDemocratsAreCriminals campaign

The fabrications: On 10 September, several X accounts posted vertical, selfie-style videos of American actors carrying CNN's logo and the overlay "#midterms2026 #AllDemocratsAreCriminals." The audio had been replaced so that the actors appeared to attack the Democratic Party. Most clips were built on personalized Cameo videos the actors had sold to fans, another used a 2023 Gucci advertisement featuring Julia Roberts.[64] A voice-cloned Alyson Hannigan said that "there isn't a single child who isn't under threat from Democrats," and Sarah Jessica Parker appeared to call Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Democrats "Nazis."[65]

Denials: The impersonated actors rejected the content. Emma Caulfield told AFP: "I feel violated." Ed Begley Jr. said he "wholeheartedly" disagreed "with everything that the video says." Eric Roberts said the statements "are not my words and do not represent my beliefs."[66] Jeri Ryan described the content as "the polar opposite of my political and social viewpoints."[67] A CNN spokesperson said the videos "are not CNN content and have no affiliation with CNN."[68]

Seeding and spread: SSI identified four seeding accounts with unrelated names that posted the clips within 70 minutes on 10 September, in English and Spanish - all have since been suspended, and archived copies survive.[69] Antibot4Navalny reported that views jumped to about 200,000 in the first hour and then stopped, with almost no likes or reposts, a pattern indicative of bot-inflated view counts rather than organic reach.[70] AFP reported that X, Bluesky and TikTok removed some of the posts.[71] The operation followed up on 11 September with CNN-branded fakes targeting named candidates, on 14 September with fakes attacking MS NOW journalist Brandy Zadrozny's reporting on the campaign, and on 30 October with 13 repurposed videos of academics under #SmartPeopleDontVoteForDemocrats.[72] The hashtag #AllDemocratsAreCriminals pre-dated the campaign; SSI found it used by an unrelated X user in April and June 2026, with no evidence linking that user to the operation. The operation adopted an existing domestic slogan rather than inventing one.

Attribution and naming: Antibot4Navalny first attributed the videos to "Matryoshka, a Russian-state bot network" on 10 September, on the basis of their distribution and

[64] McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

[65] McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

[66] McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

[67] AFP Fact Check, report on fabricated celebrity videos attacking Democrats, September 15, 2026, https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.C8DF3G8.

[68] McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

[69] AFP Fact Check, September 15, 2026; @donjochinete, post on X, September 10, 2026, https://x.com/donjochinete/status/2098063040704811468, archived at https://perma.cc/ZM72-4JYT; @dsarmad450, post on X, September 10, 2026, https://x.com/dsarmad450/status/2098064189214310874, archived at https://perma.cc/M9TS-ZYV3; @DivDelight, post on X, September 10, 2026, https://x.com/DivDelight/status/2098072170173739222, archived at https://perma.cc/R9A9-R53S. All three accounts are suspended.

[70] Cimin, "Russian Bot Campaign"; "For Weeks, Deepfake Celebrities Have Been Telling Americans Not to Vote for Democrats in the Midterm Elections. U.S. Intelligence Says Russia Is behind It," Meduza, October 23, 2026, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2026/10/23/for-weeks-deepfake-celebrities-have-been-telling-americans-not-to-vote-for-democrats-in-the-midterm-elections-u-s-intelligence-says-russia-is-behind-it.

[71] McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

[72] Antibot4Navalny (@antibot4navalny), posts on X, September 11, 2026, https://x.com/antibot4navalny/status/2098456226430689520, and October 30, 2026, https://x.com/antibot4navalny/status/2116301006938255365; McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

amplification pattern.[73] ISD's Pablo Maristany de las Casas told AFP that the fake voiceovers and misuse of CNN's logo were low-effort tactics consistent with Matryoshka, which had used Cameo videos in elections in Germany, Hungary and Armenia; Linvill called the campaign "the first salvo" against the November vote.[74] Graphika assessed with high confidence that Operation Overload and the R-FBI produced the September narratives.[75] Bloomberg described the operation as "Matryoshka, or Operation Overload," a Russian state-backed operation.[76] These names reflect different research groups' conventions for what they assess to be a single operation; Graphika's inclusion of the R-FBI indicates a co-producing entity, not a third name for the same network. The attribution is established at the level of independent research but has not been officially confirmed.

Assessment: This was the opening Russian-linked activity of the cycle. Its audience appears small and largely artificial. It nonetheless shows the low cost of impersonating trusted public figures and a major news brand at scale, and it pre-emptively targeted the journalists and researchers exposing it.

7. EXPLOITATION OF DOMESTIC DIVISIONS: ABDUL EL-SAYED *(Contextual Case)*

The campaign against Abdul El-Sayed, the Democratic Senate nominee in Michigan, was the most intense identity-based attack of the cycle. This section asks whether Russian actors amplified or exploited it. The answer, on the available evidence, is no. The case is retained as context and is not counted as a Russian operation.

The domestic campaign: The attacks centered on El-Sayed's faith and on alleged Muslim Brotherhood ties. At a rally in Port Huron on 25 October, President Trump said he had come "to keep a jihadist Muslim Brotherhood member from becoming a United States senator."[77] The Associated Press reported that there is no evidence El-Sayed has any affiliation with the group, the allegation rests in part on a 2012 post by his half-sister about their family's history.[78] A claim that El-Sayed believed America deserved the 11 September attacks, made by his Republican opponent Mike Rogers in August, was found false by FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.[79] Al Jazeera's network analysis of the "inshallah" campaign after the primary mapped 1,966 X accounts in the first 24 hours and found the spread centred on a few prominent U.S. influencers; it reported no foreign-operated accounts.[80] SSI's monitoring found that the accounts spreading

[73] Antibot4Navalny (@antibot4navalny), post on X, September 10, 2026, https://x.com/antibot4navalny/status/2098196180287332413; McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

[74] McCarthy, "Russian Disinformation Campaign."

[75] Graphika, "Russia-Aligned Influence Operation."

[76] Stephanie Baker and Priyanjana Bengani, "Russia Is Using an Army of Bots to Push Fake US Election Videos," Bloomberg, October 16, 2026, via Bloomberg Government, https://news.bgov.com/bloomberg-government-news/russia-is-using-an-army-of-bots-to-push-fake-us-election-videos.

[77] Associated Press, "Trump Escalates Anti-Muslim Attacks against El-Sayed in Michigan," October 26, 2026, republished by OPB, https://www.opb.org/article/2026/10/26/trump-escalates-anti-muslim-attacks-against-el-sayed-in-michigan/.

[78] Associated Press, "Trump Escalates Anti-Muslim Attacks."

[79] FactCheck.org, check of Mike Rogers's 9/11 claim about Abdul El-Sayed, August 2026, https://www.factcheck.org/2026/08/rogers-makes-false-9-11-claim-about-el-sayed/; PolitiFact, rating of the same claim, August 7, 2026, https://politifact.com/factchecks/2026/aug/07/mike-rogers/abdul-el-sayed-9-11-hasan-piker-michigan/. Pages not independently retrievable by the editor; details as recorded by SSI researchers.

[80] Al Jazeera Staff, "How the US Far-Right Weaponised 'Inshallah' against Abdul El-Sayed," Al Jazeera, August 10, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/10/how-the-us-far-right-weaponised-inshallah-against-abdul-el-sayed.

anti-Muslim content were predominantly identifiable U.S. politicians, commentators and influencers.[81]

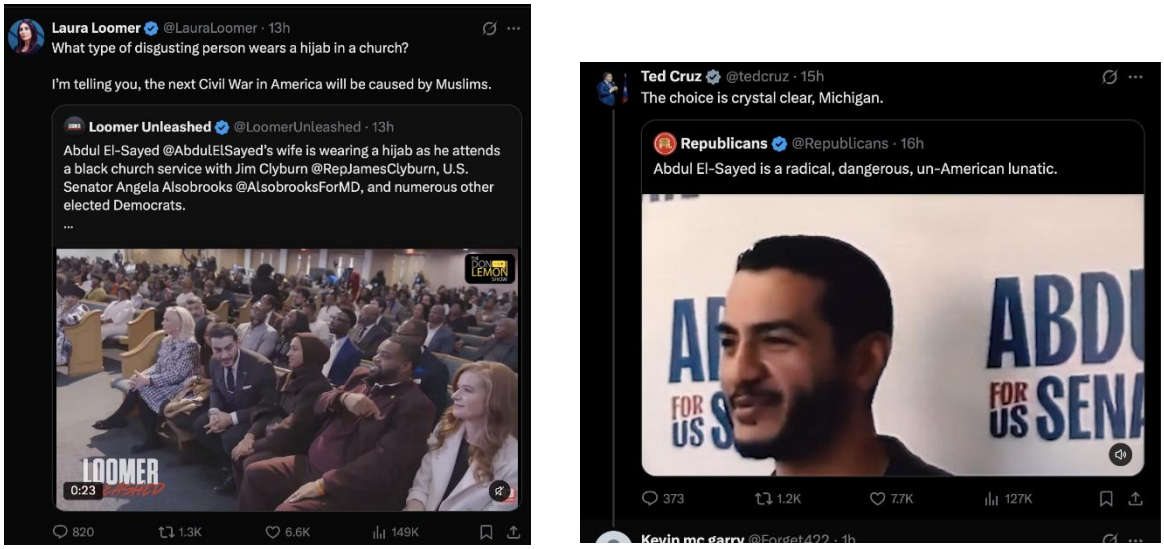


Figure 5. Domestic origin of the anti-Muslim campaign: posts by Laura Loomer (a) and Senator Ted Cruz (b), late October 2026. No Russian-linked account has been shown to have amplified this material. *Screenshots: X, captured by SSI researchers.*

Fabricated content: Some material was fabricated, but none has been linked to Russia. An AI-generated video falsely showing El-Sayed and the children's entertainer Ms Rachel discussing Israeli "colonizers" with children circulated in August; the account responsible described its output as "mostly satire," and the video has not been connected to Operation Overload.[82] A grocery-price advertisement cited as evidence of antisemitism was produced by an outside PAC that the El-Sayed campaign said it was not affiliated with.[83]

The Russian dimension (three findings bear on the research question):

1. **Targeting is established, but its content is not.** Graphika listed El-Sayed among nine Democrats targeted by Operation Overload between 10 and 14 September with videos alleging corruption, antisemitism and misconduct. Graphika did not specify the allegation directed at him, and the accounts are suspended.[84] There is no evidence that this content drew on the anti-Muslim themes.
2. **No covert amplification was found.** SSI found no evidence that Storm-1516, Matryoshka or other Russian-linked networks repackaged, translated or amplified the anti-Muslim narratives, and no researcher reported such activity.[85] The October Storm-1516 fabrications targeted Talarico, Brown and Jackson, not El-Sayed.[86]
3. **State media framed the race selectively.** RT presented El-Sayed's primary victory as that of an "Israel critic" defeating record AIPAC spending, and its 2

[81] See, for example, posts on X by Ted Cruz (@tedcruz), https://x.com/tedcruz/status/2115543219094380953; Laura Loomer (@LauraLoomer), https://x.com/LauraLoomer/status/2115856718664028380; Eric Daugherty (@EricLDaugh), https://x.com/EricLDaugh/status/2117074045166407712; Libs of TikTok (@libsoftiktok), https://x.com/libsoftiktok/status/2115894401117327847; and Batya Ungar-Sargon (@bungarsargon), https://x.com/bungarsargon/status/2115222583381496120, all October–November 2026.

[82] Mike Brennan, "Russian AI Disinformation Targets Michigan Senate Candidate, Journalists Ahead of Midterms," MITechNews, October 4, 2026, https://mitechnews.com/featured/russian-ai-disinformation-targets-michigan-senate-candidate-journalists-ahead-of-midterms/.

[83] Jewish Telegraphic Agency, report on the El-Sayed campaign's disavowal of a PAC advertisement, October 26, 2026, https://www.jta.org/2026/10/26/politics/el-sayed-campaign-disavows-pac-ad-linking-us-inflation-to-israel.

[84] Graphika, "Russia-Aligned Influence Operation"; Brennan, "Russian AI Disinformation Targets Michigan."

[85] Brennan, "Russian AI Disinformation Targets Michigan."

[86] PolitiFact, "Russian Influence Operation Linked."

November election guide described the race as a national debate over the influence of pro-Israel lobbying.[87] Neither item repeated the Brotherhood or jihadist accusations. TASS relayed Trump's Brotherhood allegation on 15 October, noting that the organization is banned in Russia.[88]

Assessment: Russian state media selected and framed the El-Sayed story around U.S. policy debates and institutional distrust, but did not originate or repeat the anti-Muslim content, and no covert Russian amplification has been demonstrated. The case illustrates a domestic information environment in which identity-based division needed no foreign help. Attributing this campaign to Russia would be unsupported and would obscure the responsibility of the domestic actors who drove it.

8. RUSSIAN STATE-MEDIA NARRATIVES AND AMPLIFICATION

RT and Sputnik covered the midterms overtly and extensively. Three narratives stand out:

1. **Democrats as a threat to cheaper energy.** In the weeks before the vote, RT linked the election to the diesel deal. One article was headlined "Democrats Want to Kill Trump's Diesel Deal. Working Americans Will Pay the Price," and a second, "Democrats Ready to Sacrifice Americans' Well-Being for Ideology," quoted the American journalist John Varoli as saying that Democrats would do "everything possible just to ruin this deal" for ideological reasons if they gained seats.[89] A third reported Energy Secretary Chris Wright's hints that the deal could be expanded.[90] The framing aligned Russian commercial interest with U.S. household costs and presented opposition to the deal as hostility to ordinary voters. Russian officials echoed it: Dmitriev's praise of the sanctions waiver is noted in Section 3.


Democrats want to kill Trump's diesel deal. Working Americans will pay the price

Senate threats over Russia sanctions waivers can scare companies off, hurting fuel supplies and driving up costs for everyone

Published 24 Oct, 2026 15:13 | Updated 24 Oct, 2026 16:15

By **Nadezhda Romanenko**, *political analyst*

With Americans struggling from soaring energy prices, and businesses across the country trying to keep their heads above water, the Democrats' apparent priority is to threaten companies that might help ease the pressure.

According to an October 22 Washington Post report, Senate Democrats are preparing to investigate American companies involved in US President Donald Trump's decision to ease sanctions on Russian diesel. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has reportedly asked businesses to preserve relevant documents ahead of possible congressional investigations, should Democrats regain control of Congress in the November midterms.

Figure 6. RT opinion article by Nadezhda Romanenko, 24 October 2026, framing Democratic scrutiny of the diesel deal as a threat to fuel supplies and household costs. *Screenshot: RT, captured by SSI researchers.*

2. **Continuity regardless of the result.** Sputnik ran interviews arguing that the midterms would not change U.S. policy towards Russia. Former CIA officer Larry

[87] RT, "Israel Critic Wins US Senate Primary Despite Record AIPAC Spending on Rival," RT, August 6, 2026, https://www.rt.com/news/643918-el-sayed-us-primary-israel/; RT, midterm elections guide, November 2, 2026, https://rt-english.com/news/648256-midterm-elections-guide-rt/.

[88] TASS, report on Donald Trump's accusation of Muslim Brotherhood ties against a Senate candidate, October 15, 2026, republished by Rambler, https://news.rambler.ru/world/57242881-tramp-obvinil-pretendenta-na-post-chlena-senata-v-svyazyah-s-bratyami-musulmanami/.

[89] RT, "Democrats Want to Kill Trump's Diesel Deal. Working Americans Will Pay the Price," RT, October 2026, https://rt-english.com/news/647616-democrats-punish-trump-diesel/.; RT, "Democrats Ready to Sacrifice Americans' Well-Being for Ideology," RT, October 2026, https://rt-english.com/news/647620-democrats-ready-sacrifice-americans-well-being-for-ideology-guests-to-rt/.

[90] RT, report on U.S. signals of an expanded Russian diesel deal, October 2026, https://rt-english.com/news/647884-us-hints-expanding-russian-diesel/.

Johnson predicted that “Russophobia” would persist, and Scott Ritter described expectations of a foreign-policy shift as illusory.[91] On 2 November Sputnik published pieces arguing that Democratic gains would deepen polarization and make U.S. foreign policy more assertive, and that a Democratic victory could worsen the conflict in Ukraine.[92] The message to international audiences was that U.S. institutions are polarized and that Russia need not adjust its position.

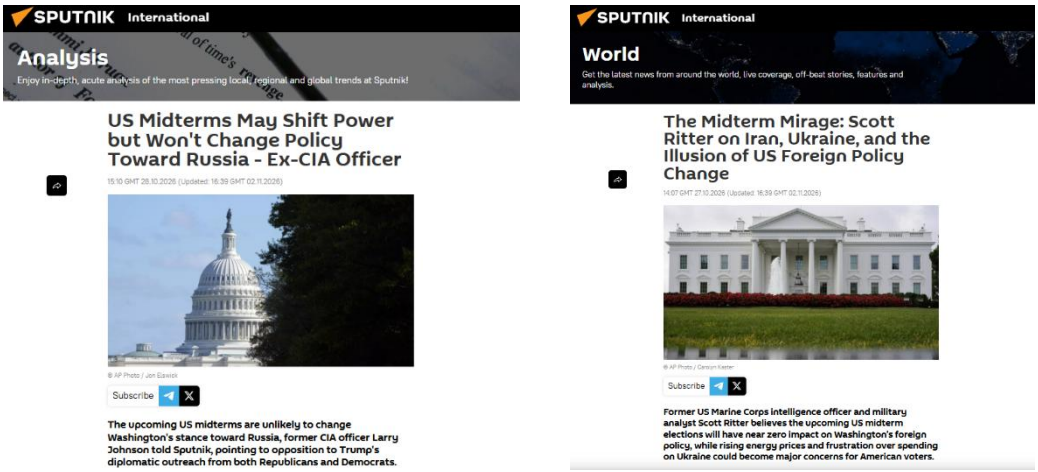


Figure 7. Sputnik’s “no change” narrative: interviews with Larry Johnson (a), 28 October 2026, and Scott Ritter (b), 27 October 2026, both arguing that the midterms would not alter U.S. policy towards Russia. *Screenshots: Sputnik International, captured by SSI researchers.*

3. **Restrained post-election framing.** RT’s results coverage attributed Democratic gains to frustration over rising costs and the war with Iran and noted that Democratic control could open investigations into the administration’s agenda; it did not promote fraud claims.[93] Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told RIA Novosti that Russia’s stance on Ukraine did not depend on changes in other countries’ political systems.[94]

Relationship to covert activity: SSI found no evidence that these articles were systematically distributed through Storm-1516 or Matryoshka networks. One Storm-1516-associated amplifier, @DangerousThinkg, posted on the diesel deal in support of a Republican candidate.[95] This is thematic overlap, not demonstrated coordination. The state-media material is therefore classified as overt Russian state-media messaging. Its function was to reinforce themes, chiefly energy costs, institutional dysfunction and the futility of change, that were already present in U.S. debate.

[91] Sputnik International, interview with former CIA officer Larry Johnson on the midterms and U.S. policy towards Russia, October 28, 2026, https://sputnikglobe.com/20261028/us-midterms-may-shift-power-but-wont-change-policy-toward-russia---ex-cia-officer-1124967884.html.; Sputnik International, interview with Scott Ritter on the midterms and U.S. foreign policy, October 27, 2026, https://sputnikglobe.com/20261027/the-midterm-mirage-scott-ritter-on-iran-ukraine-and-the-illusion-of-us-foreign-policy-change-1124950204.html.

[92] Sputnik International, articles on the consequences of Democratic gains, November 2, 2026, https://sputnikglobe.com/20261102/democratic-partys-election-gains-to-deepen-us-polarization--fuel-a-more-assertive-foreign-policy-1124990323.html and https://sputnikglobe.com/20261102/democratic-victory-in-midterms-could-worsen-ukraine-conflict-expert-1124991058.html. Pages not independently retrievable by the editor; details as recorded by SSI researchers.

[93] RT, live coverage of the U.S. midterm elections, November 3–4, 2026, https://rt-english.com/news/648286-us-midterm-elections-live-coverage/.

[94] *The Times*, report on Russian reactions to the midterm results, November 2026, https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/what-midterms-results-mean-putin-ukraine-russia-d3lp5tpwr (citing RIA Novosti).

[95] @DangerousThinkg, post on X, late October 2026, https://x.com/DangerousThinkg/status/2115048363624415529; SSI, “Cases 5 & 6.”

9. ELECTION-DAY AND POST-ELECTION INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Researchers expected Russian operations to focus on voting and ballot processing around Election Day.[96] In the sources reviewed for 3-4 November, no such Russian-linked fabrication was documented. SSI found no new Storm-1516 release targeting Talarico on those dates, and NewsGuard's 3 November round-up concerned the three October fabrications.

The Election Day falsehoods identified by fact-checkers were domestic or unattributed. The Associated Press documented claims that ballot-scanner problems in Westchester County, New York, proved Democratic cheating; officials attributed the problem to a software update, and the Republican incumbent whose seat was at stake said, "There's no shenanigans." It also documented a misrepresented photograph of a Minnesota poll worker, a misreading of NBC News guidance on projections, and texts about polling-place changes in Fulton County, Georgia, which the county said it did not send and whose senders were unknown.[97] The AP found "no verified examples of malfeasance" in the hours before polls closed.[98] None of these incidents has been attributed to a foreign actor.

There is no reliable evidence that election infrastructure was compromised. Warner and Himes said in October that the classified assessment showed no sign of a foreign operation to manipulate voting machines or alter ballots, and the September intelligence assessments found no evidence of efforts to target voting machinery.[99] Russian-linked narratives about foreign interference itself did exist. In September, Operation Overload circulated videos falsely sourced to the BBC, CNN, Politico and France's VIGINUM, claiming that the Democratic Party was running "false-flag operations" to blame Russia for interference.[100] Such content seeks to discredit future attribution before it is made.

Two limitations apply. SSI's planned rechecks of 4 November were incomplete, and the reduced federal capacity to detect and publicly attribute foreign activity means that the absence of an attributed Election Day incident is not proof that none occurred.[101]

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[96] Bond, "Russia Steps Up."

[97] Melissa Goldin and Calvin Woodward, "False Accusations and Unverified Claims Quickly Spread about Election Day Voting," Associated Press, November 3, 2026, republished by PBS NewsHour, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/false-accusations-and-unverified-claims-quickly-spread-about-election-day-voting.

[98] Goldin and Woodward, "False Accusations."

[99] David DiMolfetta, "Russia Targets Democrats and Ukraine Supporters Ahead of Midterms, Top Intel Lawmakers Say," *Nextgov/FCW*, October 21, 2026, https://www.nextgov.com/cybersecurity/2026/10/russia-targets-democrats-and-ukraine-supporters-ahead-midterms-top-intel-lawmakers-say/416747/; Volz, Barnes, and Myers, "Russia Aims to Inject Chaos."

[100] Graphika, "Russia-Aligned Influence Operation."

[101] O'Neill, "Foreign Threats."

10. STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

10.1 The Evolution of Russian Influence Methods

The 2026 U.S. midterm election cycle illustrates the evolution of Russian influence activity towards a model combining synthetic-media fabrication, identity appropriation and distributed amplification. The two operations examined in this report employed different but complementary approaches: Matryoshka/Operation Overload relied on high-volume fabrications circulated through networks of inauthentic accounts, while Storm-1516 used more targeted allegations and established intermediary accounts to reach wider audiences.

This combination allowed Russian-linked operations to pursue both broad narrative saturation and targeted reputational attacks against individual candidates. The latter were particularly consequential when they appropriated the identities of real individuals, as demonstrated by the cases involving James Talarico and Sherrod Brown. Rather than simply introducing false allegations, these fabrications placed identifiable people and their reputations at the center of stories they were not involved in.

Generative AI made such impersonation easier, but technology alone did not account for effectiveness of the campaigns. Their credibility depended on appropriating familiar formats, trusted media brands and recognizable individuals. The fabricated Cleveland 19 and WABI broadcasts, for example, sought to borrow the authority of local journalism, demonstrating how synthetic content can exploit existing sources of public trust.

The distribution networks were equally important. Material initially published by obscure or newly created accounts reached substantially larger audiences through established intermediary accounts. Therefore, the cases demonstrate that the operational significance of an influence campaign depends not only on the production of convincing fabrications, but also on the networks that amplify and legitimize them.

10.2 Exploiting Domestic Political Divisions

A central finding of this report is that Russian-linked operations exploited existing divisions within American political life rather than creating them. Their campaigns targeted Democratic candidates and adopted themes already present in domestic political debates, allowing foreign fabrications to circulate alongside partisan attacks, AI-generated advertisements and other forms of domestic political communication.

The Talarico case illustrates this convergence. Russian-linked fabrications, domestic political criticism and openly attributed AI-generated material targeted the same candidate within a relatively short period. Although there is no evidence of coordination between Russian operations and domestic political actors, their overlapping narratives entered the same information environment. Consequently, audiences encountering this material on social media may not have been able to distinguish foreign fabrications from domestic political attacks.

The case of Abdul El-Sayed provides an important contrast. The anti-Muslim campaign against him was driven predominantly by identifiable domestic political actors. SSI found no evidence that Russian-linked networks amplified or repackaged these narratives. Russian state media covered aspects of his candidacy but focused on U.S. political divisions and debates over Israel rather than reproducing the anti-Muslim allegations. Attributing these domestic attacks to Moscow without evidence would obscure the responsibility of the actors who originated and circulated them.

These cases demonstrate that Russian influence operations do not need to create new divisions or coordinate with domestic political actors to exploit political polarization and declining public trust. Their advantage lies in introducing fabricated content into an already contested information environment, where domestic amplification can extend its circulation without those sharing it necessarily knowing its origin. The resulting convergence can reinforce existing divisions without establishing coordination.

10.3 Attribution, Reach and Strategic Effects

The findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between attribution, measurable reach and demonstrable impact.

Independent researchers linked the September celebrity impersonation campaign and the October fabrications targeting Talarico, Brown and Jackson to known Russian influence operations. Technical, behavioral and account-level evidence supports classifying these incidents as established Russian-linked activity at the level of independent research. However, this does not identify all those responsible or establish the full chain of command. Other activity, including the El-Sayed campaign, overt Russian state media messaging and unattributed account behavior, must remain analytically distinct.

The absence of public U.S. government attribution of these specific incidents is also significant. Independent researchers, fact-checkers and journalists played a central role in identifying and documenting the operations, highlighting the importance of non-governmental research in monitoring foreign influence activity and the need for public institutions to communicate findings more rapidly and consistently.

The campaigns achieved measurable online reach. NewsGuard estimated that the three October Storm-1516 fabrications generated approximately 2.8 million views across 3,790 posts. These figures, however, do not establish the number of unique viewers, whether audiences believed the content or whether it influenced their political preferences. There is no evidence that the operations changed voter behavior or affected the electoral outcome.

Their demonstrable significance lies instead in the harm to individuals and institutions and the manipulation of the information environment. Private citizens were impersonated, media brands were misused, and false allegations circulated beyond their original sources, including through AI assistants. Such activity makes it harder to distinguish authentic from fabricated political content and risks undermining confidence in the information channels essential to democratic participation.

10.4 Strategic Implications and Conclusions

The findings point to four priorities for strengthening democratic resilience:

1. **Governments need stronger cooperation with independent researchers, fact-checkers and journalists to identify and assess foreign influence operations.** The 2026 cases demonstrate that non-governmental researchers can establish credible links between individual incidents and previously documented Russian operations. Public authorities should strengthen their attribution capabilities and communicate findings promptly. Where attribution remains uncertain, transparent explanations of the available evidence are preferable to unsupported conclusions or prolonged silence.
2. **Platform responses should address amplification networks, not only the removal of original posts and accounts.** Intermediary accounts can generate substantially greater reach than the sources that initially publish fabricated content. Detecting repeated distribution patterns, investigating coordinated amplification and increasing transparency around enforcement are therefore essential.
3. **Media organizations and private individuals need accessible mechanisms to verify and challenge impersonation.** The misuse of local television brands and real individuals' identities demonstrates that synthetic-media operations can cause reputational harm beyond the electoral context. Rapid authentication, visible corrections and effective reporting procedures can limit the further circulation and credibility of fabricated material.
4. **AI developers should strengthen safeguards against reproducing unverified allegations about identifiable individuals.** The repetition of false claims by AI assistants demonstrates how fabricated content can move beyond social media and acquire additional credibility through services perceived as independent sources of information.

The 2026 U.S. midterm election cycle illustrates how Russian-linked operations combine synthetic-media fabrication, impersonation and intermediary amplification to exploit existing political divisions. The evidence establishes identifiable Russian-linked activity and substantial online circulation in several cases but does not demonstrate that these operations changed voter behavior or affected the electoral outcome.

Their strategic significance lies instead in manipulating the information environment, targeting individuals and institutions, and making it harder for the public to distinguish authentic from fabricated political and media content. The central lesson is that foreign influence operations do not need to create domestic divisions to exploit them. Democratic resilience therefore depends not only on detecting and attributing foreign campaigns, but also on protecting the wider information environment in which domestic political communication, independent journalism and synthetic content increasingly overlap.



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