
AGENTS OF INFLUENCE AS AN IMPORTANT TOOL IN PROMOTING STATE'S NATIONAL INTERESTS

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Received: February 13, 2026 | **Revised:** March 20, 2026 | **Accepted:** March 31, 2026

UDC 355.40:327.8 (477)+(73)+(470)+(410)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33445/psssj.2026.7.1.3>

Abstract

This study examines the concept, functions, and strategic significance of agents of influence as an instrument of promoting state national interests within the framework of contemporary influence operations. Based on a combination of historical-comparative analysis and review of existing scholarly approaches, the paper systematizes the definitional interpretations of “agent of influence” and identifies their role in intelligence activities of leading states. The research demonstrates that agents of influence differ from traditional intelligence assets by operating predominantly within legal frameworks and targeting decision-making processes and public opinion rather than acquiring classified information. Particular attention is paid to professional categories most susceptible to recruitment, including political elites, media representatives, academics, and public figures. Empirical evidence from historical cases (World Wars, post-colonial Africa) and contemporary examples illustrates the dual nature of influence agents, whose activities may either stabilize or destabilize political systems depending on strategic objectives. The study highlights the extensive use of such agents by the Russian Federation as part of hybrid warfare against Ukraine, including pre-2014 infiltration into political, economic, and security institutions. The findings confirm that agents of influence constitute a critical element of modern influence operations, enabling adversaries to shape narratives, undermine institutional resilience, and facilitate strategic objectives without direct military engagement. The paper concludes that countering such threats requires not only intelligence measures but also institutional resilience, regulatory adaptation, and societal awareness.

Key words: Agents of Influence, Measures of Influence, Influence Operations, Disinformation, State's National Interests.

Introduction

Using of agents of influence is an integral component of measures of influence, conducted by intelligence services of the world's leading countries throughout XX – XXI centuries. The main tasks of agents of influence are the activities aimed at lobbying of the states' interests aimed at decision level by the target country, as well as subversion activities conducted by dissemination of disinformation. Russian intelligence services working against Ukraine use agents of influence in support of their national interests.

Thus, the actuality of the topic is obvious and it is important to understand the meaning of agent of influence and the necessity of their active use in pursuit of Ukraine's national interests in conditions of full-scale Russian aggression.

The analysis of the last research and publications. In (Dubov, D. V., & Koretska, I. O.; Zvonaryov, K. K., 2005; Bloch, J., & Fitzgerald, P., 1997) it was researched the peculiarities of agents of influence use by intelligence services of the world's leading countries throughout XX – XXI centuries, outlined the most perspective professional categories appropriate for using as agents of influence and researched the cases of special activities conducted by Russian intelligence services in preparation of full-scale invasion against Ukraine (Expert Group of the Project).

Results

The history of the two World Wars as well as local and regional armed conflicts of the past and present indicates that different nations have been actively using various influence measures as an essential tool in achieving their national interests.

In the context of the unequal Russian-Ukrainian military and military-technical confrontation, the highest military and political leadership of Ukraine is undertaking substantial efforts in the international arena to secure financial and humanitarian assistance, as well as comparable capabilities for engaging the adversary. Ukraine heavily relies on its Western partners, at the same time emphasizing its adherence to the common values and commitment to protect them.

Comprehensive support of Ukraine by the leading NATO members as well as of the international community is crucial in the conditions of its asymmetric confrontation with far more powerful aggressor. Moreover, the full-scale Russian aggression into Ukraine has complicated character with using variety of means. One of the most dangerous tools in this Russian toolkit is using of agents of influence in addition to launching of various influence operations and disinformation campaigns.

An agent of influence is assumed to be a person, whose activities, credibility, authority, social or public position can be actively used by the foreign intelligence services in order to influence various key individuals, who make strategic decisions, as well as to shape public opinion necessary for the realization of the national interests of the state. Such agents act covertly, legally fit into all spheres of public life and typically have high social status. In most cases such adversary assets do not seek to obtain classified information that could compromise them. In the contrary, agents of influence operate within the legal framework of their state; their public statements must not contradict the norms of the current constitution and international law on freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and freedom of thought.

In order to cover up their subversive activities, the agents of influence often pose as wholesome and law-abiding citizens, who share the values common for the state, and openly demonstrate their neutrality in their views and statements. With the increase of their social status and level of influence in society, the agent of influence can deliver far wider network of disinformation in the interests of foreign intelligence service.

According to William Joseph Casey, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (1981–1987), “agents of influence are dangerous not because their activity involves military or political espionage, but because they move among us, read uncensored versions of technical publications, exercise their legal right to request (obtain) documents from our archives, derive benefit from information leaks that they transform into weapons, listen to our public debates, and operate in small groups behind closed doors” (Dubov, D. V., & Koretska, I. O.).

In seeking prospective agents of influence, the intelligence services typically pay particular attention to specific professional categories of people. These categories as usual include: journalists; prominent bloggers; experts and scholars of different spheres of expertise; advisors in governmental bodies or to public officials; civic and political figures; clergy and other religious leaders; well-known actors, musicians, athletes, writers, and other individuals who exert influence over target audiences through personal interactions, as well as via social media or online platforms.

Moreover, the student life is the most favorable time for all above-mentioned professional categories representatives to begin working for the intelligence services, with subsequent controlled development of their capabilities in accordance with their social status (Dubov, D. V., & Koretska, I. O.).

This phenomenon is not something new. Agents of influence were actively used by various intelligence services in the past.

A former employee of the IV Main (Intelligence) Directorate of the Headquarters of the Russian Red Army, K. K. Zaigzne (Zvonarev K. K.) in his book describes the activities of German intelligence agents of influence acting in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. According to his words: "The core of the German intelligence service was undoubtedly set in St. Petersburg from where, its branches extended to all the most important strategic points in Russia. In St. Petersburg, the German assets were present in all of the institutions and circles, of more or less importance in military, political and economic terms. Today, there is no doubt that during WWI the German intelligence service had well established connections with the Russian royal court and the Rasputin clique. Those circles were the sources of the most reliable, solid and comprehensive information for the German intelligence. The only question that remains controversial today is whether Rasputin himself was an asset of the German intelligence or was used covertly. The influence of Rasputin and his circle, which surrounded Russian Empress Alexandra and through her influenced the entire policy of the Russian government, has risen to an incredible extend. It is assumed that the German intelligence was not satisfied with Rasputin's solely informational role. They also tried to influence Russia's strategic moves through him. We cannot explain in any other way the persistence with which Rasputin tried to prevent, and later to disrupt and suspend the successful Brusilovsky offensive in the Southwestern Front in 1916" (Zvonaryov, K. K., 2005).

This particular case shows the example of using an agent of influence in order to shape the policy of the state (Russia). Furthermore, it is a well-known fact that Rasputin tried to convince the tsar family to conclude a separate truce between Russia and the Central Powers.

The British intelligence was also actively employing the agents of influence in post-colonial Africa throughout the 1960s. In 1963, Kenya gained independence. Beforehand the specified events the British intelligence intensified measures aimed at shaping the country's new government, with the intent for it to remain favorable to the United Kingdom. The other point was to secure representation of the white minorities into the country's new government. To this end, a new political group was formed with the financial support secured via special fund "Ariel". Mentioned fund was created by the British intelligence. This new political group was under the leadership of Michael Blandella, a prominent political figure among the white settlers and Minister of Agriculture of Kenya (1961–1962), who later became one of the founders of the Democratic Union of African Kenya (DKAU). According to M. Blandella, for an extended period his right-hand man and advisor was Bruce Mackenzie, an influential political figure among Kenya's white settlers. Mentioned person was recruited by the British intelligence during the time of the Kenyan "Mau Mau" uprising (1952–1956).

He developed a plan to address the issue of land use by white settlers following the country's independence. At the first conference at Lancaster House in 1960, the British government delegation, led by Macdonald MacLeod and Lord Perth, proposed adopting this plan as the country's principal political course. However, in 1961, following the elections to the Legislative Council of Kenya, B. Mackenzie unexpectedly severed ties with M. Blandella and actively supported the oppositional political party – the Kenya African Union (KAU), which secured a majority in the country's Legislative Council. B. Mackenzie joined the KAU and actively assisted its leader, who later became the Prime Minister of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta. As a reward for his services, B. Mackenzie was later appointed as Minister of Agriculture in the opposition cabinet and once again put forward a

plan to regulate the issue of land for white settlers, a plan that remains in effect to this day (Bloch, J., & Fitzgerald, P., 1997).

This particular case represents the idea of using of agent of influence in order to establish mutually constructive relations between former colony and its metropole and to protect the rights of the white minorities. Thus, the role of such an “agent of influence” was rather constructive.

At the same time, the Russian Federation in pursuit of its imperialistic aspirations views this idea in a different light. At present, the Russian Federation employs a broad range of measures aimed at deliberately influencing Ukraine’s defense capability, its economic and energy potential, the stability of its political system, and the moral and psychological resilience of the Ukrainian people, with the aim of compelling them to accept the aggressor’s conditions. The measures outlined above are the components of influence operations, which according to the Russian Concept of “active measures” are referred to as “facilitation measures” (Dubov, D. V., & Koretska, I. O.).

According to the above-mentioned Concept, the key element of facilitation measures are the agents of influence. Russian Concept defines an agent of influence as an individual or group, whose activities are aimed at shaping public opinion favorable to Russia in states of Russian geopolitical interest or in states unfriendly to Russia, as well as at exerting targeted influence on their military-political leadership to secure decisions that advance the realization of Russia’s geopolitical interests. The Concept states that the activities of agents of influence constitute a key element in conducting subversive operations against the political systems of these states and in waging information-psychological warfare against their citizens. Agents of influence serve as a channel for the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation; they introduce Russian narratives and messages into the information space and create the appearance of public support or condemnation for certain political and administrative decisions. Moreover, Russian intelligence services may also use them to undermine the political system of a state, disrupt social cohesion, and destabilize the situation.

The group of analysts from the international sociological research center “Texty.org.ua” compiled materials confirming information about individuals and organizations in 19 European countries that in various ways support Russia and its policies into a report titled “The Germs of “Russian World”. Version 2.0. According to the estimates of the analysts at “Texty.org.ua,” as of 2024, more than 1,300 individuals and 900 organizations were identified as meeting the following criteria:

- voting for pro-Russian decisions and issuing statements in support of the war or calling to drop the sanctions;

- taking part in pro-Russian propagandist shows;

- partnering with the institutions, which facilitate Russia’s cultural expansion (The germs of the Russian world; The germs of the “Russian world”; The lobbying atlas; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024, November 1).

On November 1, 2024, U.S. intelligence officials said they believed Russia was behind a fake viral video of a man purportedly claiming to have repeatedly voted in the state of Georgia for Vice President Kamala Harris. Georgia’s Secretary of State characterized the video as “obviously fake,” and a joint statement by U.S. agencies described it as part of Moscow’s broader effort to raise unfounded questions about U.S. election integrity and stoke divisions among Americans (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024, November 1).

Laying the ground for a full-scale invasion into Ukraine, long before the occupation of Crimea, Russia carried out a set of above-mentioned “active measures” with the aim to achieve the following objectives:

- to ensure dependence of Ukrainian strategic enterprises on Russian raw materials and components of Russian origin;

to massively introduce technologies with a mandatory tie to a Russian supplier into Ukrainian industry and production;

to ensure the dependence of Ukrainian enterprises (especially the key ones) on Russian capital through the provision of loans utilizing financial instruments;

to ensure the entry of Russian capital into key Ukrainian enterprises of strategic importance, following by their privatization;

to adopt the Russian software and/or corporate IT services with cloud technologies into Ukrainian information infrastructures;

to purchase the Ukrainian government debt securities and concentrate them in Russian entities;

to acquire commercial and other types of confidential information regarding the enterprises' activities;

to deliberately bankrupt strategic and budget-generating enterprises in Ukraine;

to impose sanctions and restrictions on Ukrainian products in the Russian market;

to infiltrate intelligence assets into the upper management of strategic state-owned companies, central executive authorities, and the national security and defense sector (Expert Group of the Project).

Basically, these measures were carried out by a network of agents of influence that had been preemptively embedded in nearly all spheres of Ukraine's political, economic, military-economic, and social life. Before 2013, Russian intelligence services succeeded in placing agents of influence into senior leadership positions within Ukraine's executive authorities (Office of the President of Ukraine) and security structures (Security Service of Ukraine, Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine). The killing of Ukrainian activists on Maidan during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity constituted a deliberately orchestrated influence operation, directed by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), with the objectives of intensifying instability in Ukraine and diverting societal attention from the initiation of the operation to occupy the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

The composition and level of state positions held by the Kremlin agents brings us into conclusion that in preparing its aggression against Ukraine, Russia established a highly efficient network of agents of influence. The activities of mentioned network caused temporary paralysis of government functions and facilitated the seizure of parts of Ukrainian territory, in particular the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Expert Group of the Project).

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that agents of influence constitute not a secondary, but a system-forming element of contemporary influence operations. However, the argumentation requires certain methodological clarification and critical reassessment.

1. Conceptual definition issue. The article defines an agent of influence primarily through functional characteristics (impact on decision-making and public opinion). At the same time, there is no clear distinction between related categories such as lobbying, public diplomacy, and information operations. This creates a risk of overgeneralization and conceptual ambiguity. To strengthen the analysis, it is advisable to introduce clear differentiation criteria (legality, foreign control, degree of covert activity).

2. Causality concerns. The paper argues that networks of agents of influence were a key factor in Russia's successful preparation of aggression against Ukraine. However, this conclusion shows signs of post hoc ergo propter hoc reasoning. It is necessary to empirically separate the

contribution of influence agents from other factors (military weakness, political fragmentation, external constraints).

3. Selectivity of cases. The provided cases (Rasputin, Kenya, Ukraine) are illustrative but do not constitute a systematic comparative framework. The absence of counterexamples where agents of influence failed introduces a risk of confirmation bias.

4. Normative implications. The argument regarding the need to criminalize the activities of agents of influence in Europe is debatable. It may conflict with fundamental freedoms (freedom of expression and association). An alternative approach should be considered:

- emphasis on transparency of funding and affiliations;
- strengthening institutional resilience and media literacy.

5. Directions for strengthening the research.

- introduction of operationalized indicators (e.g., network analysis of influence);
- use of quantitative data (case datasets, OSINT sources);
- comparative analysis of Russian, Chinese, and Western models;
- integration into broader frameworks such as hybrid warfare and grey zone operations.

Conclusion of the discussion. Despite its relevance and practical significance, the study requires clearer theoretical delineation and stronger empirical verification of causal relationships. This would allow the research to move from a descriptive level toward an explanatory scientific model.

Conclusions

Intelligence services of the world's leading countries have been actively using agents of influence as a key element of measures of influence. The agents of influence were an important component of Russian strategy to pave the way for a full-scale invasion into Ukraine. Considering hybrid nature of the Russian aggression and its subversive activities in European states, it is essential to conduct further research in order to reveal separate individuals and organizations promoting Russian interests and spreading disinformation. Taking into account that adversary agents of influence as usual pose as loyal citizens and operate within the legal framework of their state, for European states it is necessary to adjust respective legal rules and norms in order to make their activity unlawful.

Prospects for further research: defining the peculiarities of using of agents of influence by intelligence services of Russian Federation and other members of so-called 'Axis of evil' in their subversive activities both in Europe and worldwide.

Funding

This study received no specific financial support.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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